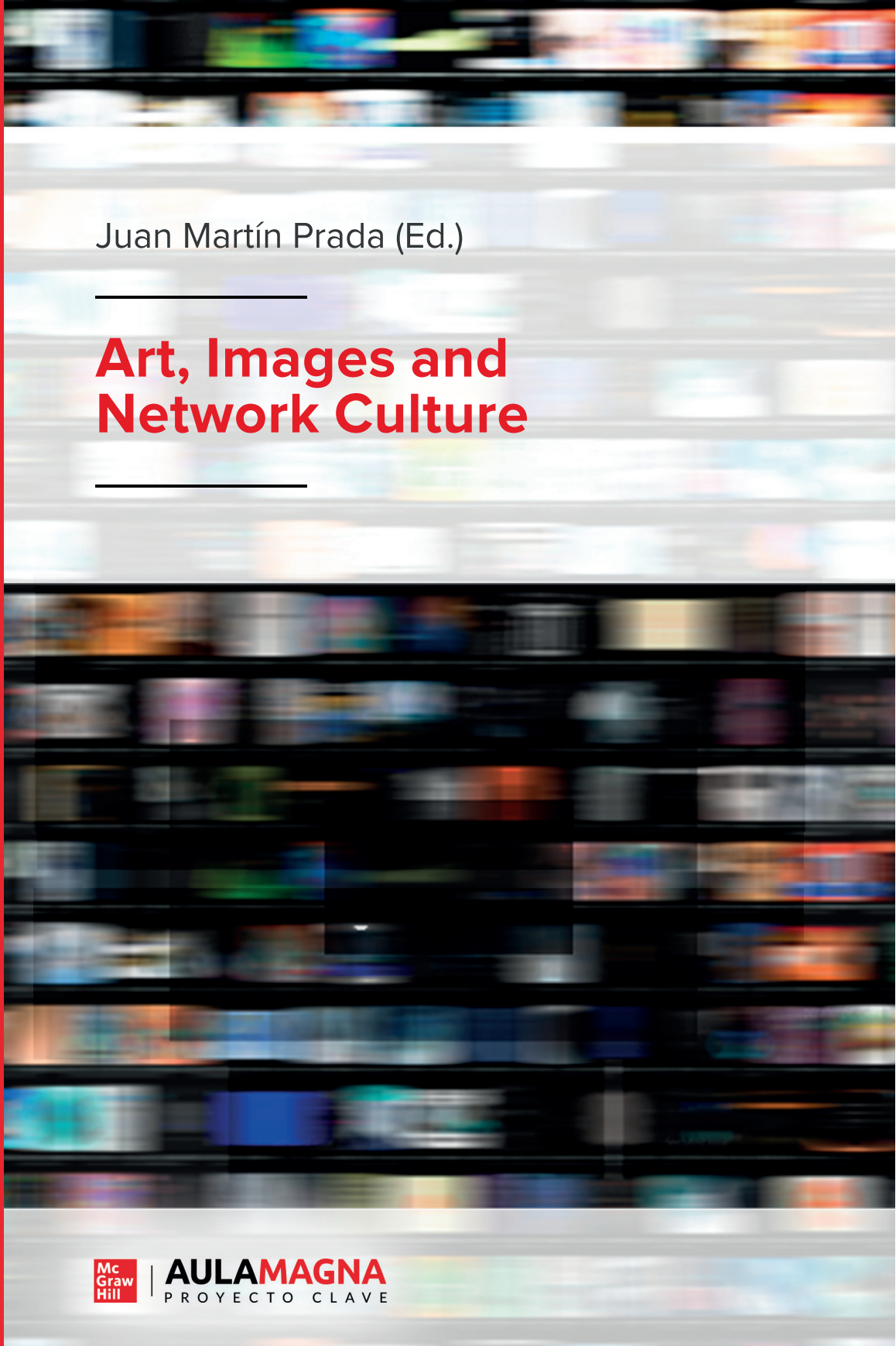

Juan Martín Prada (Ed.)

Art, Images and Network Culture

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Preface

Juan Martín Prada

The texts featured in this book have been written by members of the R&D project *Internet como campo temático y de investigación en las nuevas prácticas artísticas* ('The Internet as a thematic area and field of research in new artistic practices'), coordinated from the University of Cadiz (2018-2020).

One of the main objectives of this project has been to analyse the impact that the Internet and new connective technologies have had on the development of contemporary art over the last two decades. The aim, above all, was to determine the inherent critical potential of these new creative manifestations, including works both 'on' and 'about' the Internet, by discussing their contributions within an analysis of how subjectivity and experience are produced, i.e. processes that so define Internet culture. A focal point of this study has been to look into artistic practices that have used the Internet as their specific context for action, or rather, simply, as their main area or topic for reflection. The creative manifestations in question are all based on a view of digital connectivity as a key element in the articulation of the social, communicative and emotional interactions that arise in the present era. We thus continued with previous lines

of research into how the allegorical, subjectivising and interpretive aspects of artistic activity are always shown to have great potential for the development of alternative forms of experience, as well as encouraging critical reflection about the habits that the network system has brought about.

Bearing in mind these aims, included here are different texts that address a wide range of themes: the emergence and fundamental aspects of 'social media art', the issue of online identity as a specific theme within artistic practice, the links between digital connectivity and the physical space (telepresence/teleproxemics, augmented reality, geolocation, and so on). There is also a focus on the connections between new artistic practices and digital activism, concentrating on two of the areas that have thus far proven to be particularly active and fertile: on the one hand, an examination of the forms of property and the digital commons, and on the other hand, the critical thematisations developed by cyberfeminist creativity.

A second focal point of this research project, as addressed in the final part of the book, has been to analyse the effects of the Internet in general, and particularly social media, in terms of how images are created, circulated and received. We believed it was important to look into the transformations of the gaze and of the images' modes of existence, in a context articulated by social media. This was an attempt to at least sketch out a theory about the visual, in a context increasingly conditioned by digital connectivity – such a theory is essential for developing an aesthetic, art-based theory in the post-digital era. This line of work, in any case, shares with the aforementioned one an ever-critical stance regarding the ways in which the economic colonisation of the network system's communicative interactions take place, which today are almost always mediated or sustained by images.

Finally, I would like to take the opportunity to thank all the members of the research team for their work on this R&D project over the last three years, and particularly those who have participated in this publication. Likewise, I would also like to thank George Hutton

for all the intensive translation work that this book has demanded. I must also express my appreciation to all the research admin staff at the University of Cadiz for their support over the course of this project. I am especially grateful for the valuable collaboration with the Centre for the Study of the Networked Image (CSNI), based in the School of Arts and Creative Industries at London South Bank University, and particular thanks go to its co-director, Andrew Dewdney. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to all those mentioned here, and may we continue to collaborate in the future.

Towards a Theory of Social Media Art

Juan Martín Prada

The bursting of the dotcom bubble at the start of the century, along with the phasing-in of the so-called Web 2.0 and its standard business model, gave rise to a context that was quite unlike the one which had previously served as a testing ground for the earliest iterations of Internet art.

If the shift from the information society to the means-of-access-to-information society had been particularly fruitful for the development of multiple lines of media art, then the changes that were bringing about a personal-means-of-access-to-and-broadcasting-of-information society were proving to be even more promising. Before long, blogs, microblogging platforms, metaverses, social networks and the emerging collective archives for photography and video had all become new contexts for artists to carry out critical action and exploration. This was the beginning of social media art, the range of artistic practices that would use the emerging participative platforms of Web 2.0 as their own particular field of action. The new, online forms of socialisation, as well as the logics themselves of

the communication model centred on 'user-generated content' and, more specifically, on the 'broadcast yourself' notion, would form the basis of these new offshoots of contemporary art.

We would witness, therefore, and particularly from 2004 onwards, a prolific evolution of a range of artistic practices that, having emerged as 'net.art' in the early nineties, would now find new routes for their growth and development, based on the cutting-edge social and participatory dynamics of the social web and the technologies behind it. In any case, the fiercely critical and ironic quality that permeated the early works of Internet art would continue to be their defining trait.

In order to speak of a second era of Internet art, or 'social media art', means looking into a period when online artistic creation had reached a level of sophistication that only ever seemed possible once the late-90s 'net lag' had been overcome. This was a new phase, in which the frenzied hype around the early net.art had cooled down, and there was a certain air of despondency caused by the fact that so many of net.art's founding critical principles had since been institutionalised and neutralised.

1. Artistic practices and new online participatory platforms

One of the key catalysts in the surge of social media art was the rise of the blogging phenomenon at the end of the last century, at a time when services such as Blogger, MSN Spaces, AOL Journals and LiveJournal all started to make it possible for anybody, even those without any technical expertise, to set up, in a matter of minutes, their own personal logbook. In the mid-2000s, there were estimated to be around 71.7 million active blogs around the world, and this number was increasing at an astonishing rate (some statistics from 2006 indicate that over 175,000 blogs were being created per day).

The surge of the blogging phenomenon brought with it a vast collection of new forms of social critique and political debate, and active channels for opinion-forming and collective action. Blogs were soon shown to be the ideal place for cultivating and establishing critical voices of dissent, based on self-expression and personal and creative subjectivity, as a springboard for social transformation and change. All of this seemed to prove that the slogan 'We, the Media' was gradually coming true.

It was around 2005 when the blog was beginning to be explored as a specific medium for artistic creation. We recall, for example, the works included in the blog called 'blog art', by Marisa Olson and Abe Linkoln [http://blog-art.blogspot.com/], the pieces selected for exhibitions such as 'art + blog = blogart?' (2007) curated by Wilfried Agricola de Cologne for his JavaMuseum, or in 'BlogArt/ Blogumentary', curated by Annette Finnsdottir in 2007.

Generally speaking, in the early works of blog-art there appeared to be a fascination with reclaiming the self within the media landscape, hence the turn towards what we might call a certain 'egology'. At the start of the century, as opposed to the old *cyberpunk* dystopias that were based on simulation, avatars and post-human bodies, the development of Web 2.0-style participatory platforms instead imposed a radical return to *reality*, to specific people and lives, to the individuality of a person, with a first name and a last name, with a life story, someone who shares, who openly talks about their life. Many artists were enthusiastic about this new central role of the self, who engages in self-expression, carries out self-research, and who publicly shares their thoughts, ideas, opinions and confessions. In fact, one of the fundamental aspects of blog-art is the critical consideration of how the world has become a direct reflection of what I perceive, what I feel, what I believe. Many of these new artistic proposals focused on the fine line between the possible effects of the emotional reduction of the common social reality (a typical formalisation of egotistical narcissism 2.0) and these new technologies' potential for democratising the exercising of opinion, in the context of the Internet.

The most interesting cases of social media art, and blog-art in particular, tend to show that artistic thinking can help playfully and poetically reshape some of the more common models of online communicative practice and social interrelation. The sense of irony that runs through most of these proposals actively negates (or even subverts) some of the most unshakeable assumptions about supposedly normal or useful online communicative exchanges, which themselves are almost always determined by the interests of the major Internet corporations. This was made patently clear, for example, in the project by Jodi called *<$BlogTitle$>* (2006-07), on the Blogger platform. It was a chaotic blog which called into question the *conventional* systems of signs and symbols on the Internet, those which are deemed entirely acceptable by the incorporated systems that manage the Internet's flows of communication. In fact, most social media art tends to follow in the footsteps of early net.art, which, rather than complying with the Internet's prevailing linguistic regimes that aimed for efficiency, instead opted for illegibility, haphazard layouts and the same glitch aesthetics as the computer error ('error' understood as something within the system, but that does not follow its rules, etc.). These proposals remind us that the pragmatic aspects of online art have always been closely linked to the idea of *destinerrance*, or the unsayable: they hope to inject a certain degree of disorder into the act of communication. It was about seeing what happens when you merge what is given and expected within a certain medium, even the medium itself, with other elements that work against it or disable it. These projects sought to radically prevent any *constructive* interaction by the visiting user-spectator, and they would find support from critical voices who denounced the fact that blogging's central ideology of commenting and participating was in fact too similar to that which, a decade beforehand, had been the great promise of electronic interaction, also long-heralded as being supposedly full of democratising potential. All of this explains why works of blog-art were often pitched somewhere between psychedelia and the subversion of code, producing (as seen in *Screenfull.net*

(2005) by Jimpunk and Abe Linkoln, for example) extreme exercises in creating chaotic and unfathomable informative material, made up of elements gathered from countless sources within the Internet culture. These proposals wanted the Internet to be understood as something more like a particular mental state rather than a context designed for communication and socialising, and they formed a motley patchwork of informational discharge, as well as a takedown of the blog as a means of communication in the most conventional sense. In many of these creations, the technological infrastructure itself is in the spotlight, revealed to be a machinic system which thus prevents any possibility of debate.

Another prominent theme in the early days of blog-art was social media's dependence on constant growth and continuous updates. It might be useful to compare blogs/social network accounts with certain aquatic animals that just drown and die if they ever stop moving. This works as a metaphor for a communication system in which the numbers of visitors and followers are, to a large extent, determined by how often new content is uploaded. It might well be the case that more and more people now regard their public and constant self-expression as a fundamental need, so no wonder this often goes hand-in-hand with a certain sense of anxiety: this is the so-called 'blog depression' or 'blog life crisis' as alluded to (with tongue firmly in cheek) in works such as *Sorry I Haven't Posted* (2010) by Cory Arcangel or, in the field of video installation more specifically concerned with social media, *Boys Who Havn't Posted In A While* (2009) by Nia Burks.

The art that investigates this relentless regime of updates, of having to keep churning out new content, which blogs and social media brought into the Internet experience, has often been taken to extremes. A good example is how life is subjected to this regime in *Psych|OS-hansbernhardblog* (2005) by UBERMORGEN, part of *The Psych/ Os Cycle*, an extreme take on the public exposure of a human being's life over time, and how the community-observing-a-representation in fact turns out to be a community-observing-a-

life. Such proposals can only be understood from the perspective of the tradition of the 1970s conceptual practices that focused on and analysed the experience of time (such as those by On Kawara and Sam Hsieh, for example). The issue at hand is how life becomes subjugated by the time-based protocols of a shared system of records. In fact, many manifestations of social media art are not really about testing a new medium, but rather about the artist's own experience on these platforms (under the watchful gaze of many others). These works almost always assert that we are, fundamentally, shared time, and today, as is pretty clear, this time is exhibited and documented all over social media.

Another important line of action in blog-art is that of 'group blogging', which emerged around the year 2002 as an attempt at turning the blog into a kind of system for the collective accumulation of different material found online. These artistic manifestations have since been the object of interesting curatorial projects, among which we must certainly highlight *Surfing Club* by Raffael Dörig at [plug. in] in 2010, which included pieces by Aids-3D, John Michael Boling, Petra Cortright, Aleksandra Domanovic, Harm van den Dorpel, Joel Holmberg, Oliver Laric, Guthrie Lonergan, Paul Slocum and Nasty Nets, Spirit Surfers and Loshadka.

Halfway between parody and decidedly ironic naivety, these types of collaborative blogs are presented as surprising catalogues of stuff, following thousands of hours of online surfing by their creators. They are the result of an impulse for building an archive, for collecting weird images, for compiling reactions to certain sensations and lived experiences, in this process of wandering around the Internet. They are collage-blogs, collections of bizarre digital objects, genuine contemporary versions of the cabinets of curiosities from centuries past.

By navigating around this memory-being, this memory-world made up of networks of infinite interconnected memories, the participants of the 'Internet Surfing Clubs' propose, as a guiding principle for their creative action, a new compulsive and transformative kind

of archiving, which is ironic and highly inventive. In this creative activity, which works as a form of specific and critical visual consumption, the artwork is but the expression of a movement, a creative and profoundly ironic trip around a whole universe of visual data and references which the artist (redefined as a kind of 'professional surfer') refuses to consume passively and complacently. Instead, they recontextualise, resituate or recreate and transform these elements, showing us different possible ways of *metabolising* the digital items that make up the visual imaginary of our times.

In the early 2010s, the evolution of the blog phenomenon would now shift, principally, towards microblogging, particularly by means of services such as Twitter (which had launched in 2006). This change was driven by the widespread uptake of new Internet-connected smartphones and tablets, which diverted the new online communicational model towards something more like social networking. Many individual blogs, characterised by their long and pensive posts, were soon replaced by accounts on Twitter and other platforms, heading towards a purely conversational model. The move from blogging to microblogging was, in any case, entirely logical and predictable, part of the inexorable trend for increasingly rapid and instantaneous communication, closer to a form of real-time communication. Ultimately, all of this was proof of the theoretical foundations upon which the emerging Web 2.0 business model was based. It is now clear that this model was never really about turning us into broadcasters of information or content providers – instead, we have become the information that is sent and shared, communicating what we are doing, how we feel, where we are, what's on our mind, etc. This development changed the conventions of online communication, and many artists would soon begin to address it critically. Early 2008 saw the appearance of the first artistic proposals to pay close attention to the multitude of social dynamics that take place on and around these new communicative services. The term 'Twitter art' became more and more prevalent. Furthermore, there was renewed interest in research that looked into the aforementioned issue of the

regimes of relentless updating, typical of blogging. A good example is the series *'working on my novel' – Great Twitter searches Volume #1* (2009) or *Follow my other Twitter – Great Twitter searches Volume #2* (2011) by Cory Arcangel, in which he studies patterns of repetition, not only in the forms of communicative expression, but also in the states and life situations experienced by the connected multitude. These issues were taken to the limit in Vanesa Linden's project *Me* (2018), which focused on the processes of constructing identity on Twitter. Also worth highlighting, with regards to the idea of the real time of online interpersonal communication, is *L'attente* (2007) by Gregory Chatonsky, a good example of a flow aesthetic that generates an automatised fiction without a scripted narrative, endlessly in progress. In fact, the continuous stream of Twitter posts is the central theme of many Internet-based installations (part of a category of online/offline hybrids that is ever full of potential, so much so that it could even be considered as a specific genre of Internet art in its own right). Along these lines, we must also single out *Murmur Study* (2009), an installation by Christopher Baker in collaboration with Márton András Juhász.

2. Social Network Art

It was 2002 when the social networks started to gain traction, and they truly took off in 2003 (let us not forget, though, that some networks had already existed for some time, such as Classmates.com, which was launched in 1995). These massive new networks would soon form a context for collective participation, one which would prove to be hugely appealing to many artists. Works such as those included in the exhibition 'My Own Private Reality – Growing Up Online in the 90s and 00s' (2007), curated by Sabine Himmelsbach and Sarah Cook, or the collection of projects selected on the website 'Antisocial Networking' (2008) are good examples of these early artistic manifestations, many of which looked into why there was

such widespread fascination with online participation, as well as questioning what this participation was really about, and how we are to understand the 'social' part of the newly 'social' web.

A great deal of the new Internet art could be described as creative exercises in dissent, in the context of the Web 2.0. We can thus regard many of these artistic practices as specific ways of offering interpretive and critical opposition to the new demands and needs that were beginning to organise the Internet and sustain its emerging business models. Also, as a whole, this new art was ideal for developing alternative models for assessing the prevailing habits of linguistic exchange and collective collaboration/participation that were typical of this second phase of the Internet - in other words, it was a critical method for exploring what we might refer to as the 'capitalism of the affects'. Clearly, interpersonal relationships and socialisation were starting to become one of the bedrocks of this new form of economic production. The management of sociability and of personal interactions soon became one of the driving forces behind the biopolitical production of the new forms of online business, where there was an increasingly blurry line between economics and communication, in a continuous fusion of the cybernetic and the affects. In fact, many works of social media art critically examine how the new biopolitical context was starting to depend, fundamentally, on a complex amalgam of productive relations between the affects and value. One of the most common strategies of this new art was to highlight how these corporations leave their fingerprints all over the processes of communication and social interrelation just by making them technically possible, and to point to the effects of this economic colonisation of communication. Ultimately, this art questions why it is more and more difficult to distinguish between validity or field of meaning and economics, between the genuine need to communicate and the mere consumption of information. By addressing topics that mirror the specific functional forms of the social web itself, these artworks' demands for interpretation show, ultimately, the need for a critical and politically engaged reflection on how the network

system operates, and on this system's mechanisms for mediating social interaction.

In addition, social networking again brought to the fore the issue of the presentation of the persona in the social space, the matter of the 'staging of the self'. This remains a key thematic focus for many artistic projects that look into the ways of dealing with identity and self-representation on the Internet. This line of artistic work includes durational projects, which can last months and even years, embedded within the continuous flows of communicative interactions on social media. Performative pieces, such as *Excellences & Perfections* by Amalia Ulman, on Instagram, or *Born Nowhere* (2011) by Laís Pontes, on Facebook, are two good examples of this type of artistic endeavour.

These kinds of social media interventions have shown the endurance, particularly in new feminist art, of strategies based on simulating gender stereotypes and playing around with fictitious roles and identities – these lines of work appear to have found, in the context of the social networks, the perfect space for new developments. Prevalent themes in these new lines of creation include the selfie craze and how these self-representations are shared, the obsession with bodily perfection and the fixation on the latest consumer trends and luxury goods. They are artistic practices which often make use of a fictitious, first-person narrative, taking as their starting point the conventions as dictated by the biggest social media stars.

In particular, photography-based online performances explore, in depth, the expectations that an image can generate via its digital circulation, expectations which we are, to some extent, predetermined to believe and appreciate. These performances play an important role in helping to clarify what we might term the new 'regimes of belief' that operate in the online context. Likewise, other users' reactions and the processes of psychological projection, as triggered by the performance itself, are central to this kind of artistic proposal. These responses are expressed in the comments posted alongside

the work, which the artists use as a way of *complementing* the images that make up the backbone of their discourse.

In the latest online performances by Laura Bey or Colectivo 8552, for example, there is a direct critique of the prevailing *broadcast yourself* logic, and of the communicative hypertrophy in which we live in the network system. Essentially, it would appear that, today, nothing is held back, everything turns to language, everything is publicised, outwardly expressed, everything becomes part of a communicative interaction. This is a context dominated by the 'be yourself' imperative, where participants have to demonstrate, visually, that they can have a good time and a life *of their own* - a context which is referenced in numerous poetic reflections on this matter. In these online interventions, which focus on the enjoyment and anxiety of displaying oneself, the Internet is revealed to be a huge theatre where we are all invited to join in, playing ourselves, in a vast confessional. Here, the words of Rousseau, in his *Confessions*, echo loudly: "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I."[1] In this context of hyperexposure, we are now more likely to be defined by the little that we do not show, rather than the great deal that we do openly share. Highly pertinent here is the simple installation by the collective Knaggi, entitled *Would you still love me if I showed you my browser history?* (2015).

The issue of privacy is, of course, one of the central themes in social media art, which invariably takes us back to the old debates on the demise of intimacy, and back to the discussions around how revolutionary and emancipating it could be, according to some, to live in a glass house (we recall what Walter Benjamin said about this in 1929),[2] and the inherent submission to the globalised digital panopticon.

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1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Confessions*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books. 1953, p. 17.

2 See Walter Benjamin, 'Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia' in *New Left Review* I/108, March-April 1978.

Another important field of reference for social network art is what we might consider to be the greatest danger posed by the new media *egologies*: the aforementioned emotional reduction of the common social reality. It is as if the world is only interesting to us when it serves as a stage where we can open up emotionally, something which Richard Sennet called, a long time ago, a *psychomorphic* vision of reality, i.e. reality as a mere reflection of the ego. An ego which, in many cases, tries to get to know itself by constantly examining itself in the mirrored surface of a digital device's screen (a computer, tablet or smartphone). As such, one of the most recurring themes in social media art is how the Internet tends to act like a mirrored surface, in a very literal sense. There have been many in-depth investigations into how the act of browsing the Internet is, for us, increasingly like looking in a mirror: we always come across our own affinities, the ghosts of our desires, our preferences, our curiosities, what people like us are into, or what the artificially intelligent algorithms predict we will like. This can be seen in phenomena such as 'filter bubbles', which create tailored online 'personal ecosystems', the importance of which has been widely acknowledged in the artistic sphere, even beyond social media art (it is worth remembering, for example, the exhibition 'Filter Bubble', curated by Simon Castets and Hans Ulrich Obrist, at LUMA, Zurich, in 2016).

Now that everything has turned into a game of gazes and self-presentation on the online stage, the issue of how we display ourselves and, in particular, how we adapt to the gaze of the camera, has become more important, in this world teeming with devices for visual documentation. This is a core concept in social media art, which we can express with the help of Sartre's intuition that 'being' is, above all, 'being seen': we are observed beings. It may be the case that, essentially, as users of social networks, the same thing happens to us as happened to King Aegisthus in Sartre's great play *The Flies* (1943): "But I have been trapped in my own net. I have come to see myself only as they see me." This being in the sense of being seen, like being *in vision*, is addressed in new artistic practices by

how they tirelessly explore the poetic possibilities of an extreme phenomenology of being on camera, of the self in front of the lens, in that vast space of mostly anonymous and undetected gazes, i.e. the social media space.

3. Other online relational spaces

The manifestations of social media art examine, again and again, how the arrival of the Web 2.0-style technologies and services, at the beginning of the 21st century, put an end to the cyberpunk dystopias, those based on simulation, avatars, virtual bodies and cyborgs. In the 1970s and 80s, these dystopias shaped many people's image of what the future, i.e. our present, would be like. However, with the rise of social networking and the huge online collective archives for images and videos, things ended up going in the opposite direction. Today's Internet users are asked to show their most personal, intimate side, to share their personal choices and preferences, to state their opinion – in short, to portray *themselves*. The new forms of online business no longer want users who are hidden behind an avatar or a pseudonym. Perhaps this is why metaverses such as Second Life have failed, because the user in such a space has to be represented, *acted* by an avatar. The opposite is now true – today, everything revolves around exploiting a more concrete identity, acknowledging a presence shown in *real* data, in a continuous search for selfhood.

Nevertheless, we cannot overlook the huge growth that took place, above all in the first decade of this new century, in terms of actions and performances that were devised for the great many metaverses. We can illustrate this by considering, for example, the collective Second Front and their neo-surrealist performances in Second Life. In these performances, the avatar-body underwent infinite transformations, characterised by absolute variability and, furthermore, free from any material restrictions. These initiatives followed up the already-established argument in favour of the

migration of bodies to the digital context, regarding the Internet as a much-needed *prosthesis*, a field open to an ever-changing be-whatever-you-want-to-be, and a potential escape route from the obsession with identities that depend on the physical body. They were works of art that chose to consider the idea of the avatar as an element that could quash identity, and the aim was for the subject to adopt, radically, multiple identities, by means of extraordinary bodily appearances.

As well as this, we must not forget that the virtual surroundings of online multiplayer games would serve as an interesting setting for another offshoot of social media art. The artistic interventions that focus on these spaces seek, above all, to dispel the idea that online games or metaverses are merely forms of entertainment, and instead turn them into a means for encouraging as yet undeveloped modes of social interaction, trying out new forms of sociability. This was the broad intention behind *agoraXchange* (2004), an initiative coordinated by Jackie Stevens and proposed as an online community dedicated to the imagining and constructing of a multiplayer game of global politics that might be able to challenge the violence and inequality in today's international political systems. In a similar vein was *Distributive Justice* (2001) by Andreja Kuluncic, included in Documenta XI at Kassel, which was a scathing criticism of the current models of economic distribution, proposing alternative routes for critical thought with regards to individual autonomy and human relations on the Internet.

The in-depth research into the mediating role that multiplayer games and environments can play when designing alternative forms of coexistence is undoubtedly the most interesting part of projects like these. If, in a game, the user assumes the role of *being in power*, this idea might easily be extended to collective empowerment in terms of a set of social needs, linked to the recurring idea of a 'joystick nation'. This is why the concept of virtuality must shake off, progressively, its connotation of falsehood, of mere appearance or simulation, of that which is not real, in order to claim back its

more accurate meaning of the potential to be: the virtual should be understood as potentiality that exists outside of reality, as well as something dynamic, like in engineering when they use the term 'virtual displacements' to refer to the potential movement of a given mechanical system. Thus, virtuality would replace fantasy as the basis and cornerstone for thinking about certain transformations in the sociopolitical sphere, affording them credibility by trying them out, in advance, in the digital context.

Also of great interest are the lines of artistic work that engage with the 'persistent worlds' of some multiplayer games, which can host tens of thousands of players at the same time. In these new 'social' spaces we have seen the rise of different kinds of interventions and 'code-performances' that recall many of the aims and intentions, in some cases long-forgotten, of the first manifestations of public art in urban contexts.

4. Artistic practices and the 'network-system'

In this second phase of the poetics of connectivity, the deeply analytical trait that so characterised the earliest online artistic practices is still their most distinctive feature today. This is true of those proposals that work specifically within social media, and also of those 'offline' works that focus on issues around the state of hyperconnectivity following the spread and uptake of the Internet. These latter pieces also look into how experience and subjectivity are produced in our times (they form part of a range of practices which are today grouped under the label 'post-Internet art'). They are all initiatives in which the potential of artistic thinking and experience continues to be tested, in many different ways, as part of a critical reflection about digital connectivity and its role as the key articulatory element of the new life rules that so define our time.

Like the first iterations of Internet art, social media art still makes use of *invagination* as a key strategy for action. This is about

containing the medium instead of being contained by it, presenting the medium instead of being presented by it. The key point is not how to create a work of art as if it were a spectacle that can pass comment on the emerging social conditions in the context of the Internet, but rather, how to present the Internet as a *spectacle* in its own right.

The best social media artworks elaborate on how, today, power tends to become merged with life, how power has become increasingly abstract, how it is no longer exerted upon individuals, but rather, and very much in line with Foucault's diagnosis, power circulates right through them – all of us, whether aware of it or not, help it circulate. In many of these works, they clearly set out how the most effective devices for exerting power in the network culture are now based on participatory logics, on the pleasurable flows of social activity.

Amid the evolution of this whole ensemble of artistic practices, it would become ever clearer that the allegorical, subjectivising and critical aspects of artistic activity, which always need a strongly interpretive side, are still crucial: they serve to encourage more reflexive and critical experiences, especially regarding the prevailing habits and forms of linguistic exchange, collaboration and participation that are found online. And, of course, an important challenge within social media art will continue to be that of working out what the new categories of absence are – above all, looking into the forms of exclusion and geographical discrimination that exist in this system of hyperconnectivity, a system which is nevertheless always presented to us as something completely inclusive and globalising.

Despite this, and compared with the first wave of Internet art, today's social media-based art is no longer quite so focused on the specificity of the Internet medium as compared to other means of expression. Likewise, it does not tend to concentrate on identifying the Internet's technical codes for functioning and interacting, nor on the possibilities that the Internet has opened up for the development

of *new* artistic languages. Today, the leading concern is what this medium is actually doing to us, understanding the Internet as the main articulatory element in our everyday lives. This is why there is so much interest in the analysis and creative thematisation of the processes of inclusion of the subject (of all of us) in the network system. Thus, the main critical angle in this particular area of art today is not so much the critical experimentation with a *new* medium, but rather our own experiences within this medium. The principle aim is to elaborate upon the seductive merging between, on the one hand, the emancipatory and equality-seeking factors as promised by electronic connectivity, and, on the other, the authoritarian factors that the user is forced to confront, amid the endless barrage from the connective system's own consumerist ideology and its effects. The critical spirit of the relationship between art and the Internet therefore resides in the elaborate blends of freedom and domination that thus arise, and in analysing the processes for the production of subjectivity and experience which characterise this relationship today.

A recurring reference point in social media art is how the driving force behind production today is not so much 'work' in the traditional sense, but rather affect-based enjoyment and relational pleasure as experienced over social media. This is perhaps why there have been so many projects that look into how our relationship with these informational machines is giving rise to an idea of desire that can be defined not as something that we are lacking, but, more than anything, as proper *functioning*. Essentially, it seems that what we most desire, so hypnotically, is to form part of the network-system, that world of permanent connectivity, characterised by a focus on the possibility for communication, as opposed to the act itself of communicating.

We must not forget that the second phase of the Internet has also entailed the consolidation of new business models that form the basis of what we have termed an inclusive network-system. Most notably, the consumption of connected devices, and the inherent economic interest in this consumption, has taken

precedence over the actual communicative or relational possibilities of these devices. This has come hand-in-hand with the powerful oligopolistic control over Internet usage, based on the proliferation of centralised platforms and closed-off spaces for hosting content and socialising. All of this threatens to break up the Internet into fragmented islands. And, given this situation, looking into how the large corporations leave their fingerprints all over the processes of communication and social interrelation, just by making them technically possible, might continue to be a fertile ground for artists. At present, the large companies that run the whole global system of connectivity always try to draw attention to the processes, to the dynamics, and no longer to the messages or their contents. There is no doubt that whatever is said, whatever we say in the context of these networks, it all forms part of the same system. We really have to bear this in mind when thinking about the 'anti-system' potential of the network-system. This is why the most interesting developments in the relationship between art and connectivity that we have seen over the last fifteen years have not been based on a creative exploration or investigation into a specific medium (the Internet) and its technologies, but rather they have focused on how individuals are assimilated into the network culture and economy, and how they adapt to it. What social media art endeavours to do, above all, is to turn the media process itself into a theme for artistic work, as well as all the assemblages that connect us to it, making us think about something that is far greater than just a means of transmission or communication, by establishing it, precisely, as an artistic activity. And, of course, if in this second era of the Internet it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between validity or field of meaning and mere economics, then this would explain why a fundamental objective of these practices today is, precisely, to reveal this distinction.

Digital identity in artistic practices on social networks

Real or invented subjectivities

Henar Pérez Martínez

1. Introduction

The vast technological developments of the last two decades, as well as the central role of the Internet and online communications, are proof that we are racing towards the 'global village' as prophesised by Marshall McLuhan in his 1960s work *Understanding Media*. The oxymoron of a global village suggests a reduced space, apparently small enough for a community to engage with in its entirety, a community that is subjugated to the rapid dissemination of information, which establishes, as such, the local as an essential part of the global.

In his writings, McLuhan explores the structural impact of technology on society, and he ultimately reaches the conclusion that all means of communication and technologies have a fundamentally linguistic basis: in essence, they generate a kind of language that

comes from humans' eagerness to spread out, via their senses, into the surrounding medium – that is, to communicate. Bruce R. Powers (1989) recalls that Marshall McLuhan once said to him:

> Truth is not matching. It is neither a label nor a mental reflection. It is something we make in the encounter with the world that is making us. We make sense not in cognition, but in replay. [. . .] Representation, not replica. (p. xi)

McLuhan's words imply that communication is based on the social relation, and technologies are the medium, the meeting point where we can interact. In these times of pandemic, recognising the social network as a meeting point has become clear and crucial for society.

In the global field of the Internet, and specifically on the web 2.0, artistic practices are carried out away from the artistic institutions and elitist circles that are so typical of the mega-exhibitions and commercial art fairs (although such practices can indeed be found in these institutionalised spaces). It could be claimed that the fence around the 'art institution' has been knocked down. However, this view is somewhat reductive and simplistic. According to Juan Martín Prada, the first Internet artists sought not only to leave the commodified circuit of the art world and call into question certain formulas, such as the processes of 'fetishisation' that prevail in the systems for exhibiting and commercialising art. However, few of these artists were actually against the art system itself (Martín Prada, 2015, pp. 18-21). The artistic practices discussed in this article use social networks and the Internet as their principal medium for expression, i.e. the vehicle that helps us connect with each other. Technology and online social platforms play a role at least as mediators – not all of the works here directly address the network-system (Martín Prada, 2015), but rather this is its field of action, its main tool for transmitting concepts, as is the paintbrush to the painter.

Therefore, in this text there will be discussion of issues such as the construction of identity on social networks, and the creation of

multiple subjectivities in which the truthfulness and the specificity of the physical are blurred with the ubiquity and ethereal of the digital.

2. Theoretical and ideological explanations of the globalised context

Aesthetic globalisation is a fundamental process in today's society - it refers to the meeting points and intersections generated by global communication networks, which are increasingly elaborate and integrated. Although global culture does produce certain degrees of decentralisation and deterritorialisation, cultural movements are still unequal: they tend to flow from North to South, and certain contexts have more clout, due to the ongoing symbolic domination as exerted by the central countries over those on the peripheries. Nevertheless, globalisation is often understood as the world's definitive form of singularisation, standardisation and homogenisation, much to the benefit of capitalism and neoliberalism. As far as art and culture are concerned, we can find universal codes of representation which, despite being similar, harbour a multitude of differences. Meanwhile, the globalising process has made social relations more complicated. Primary or secondary relationships are established by means of direct interpersonal links, or they come about via the roles we assume in our social lives, in a specific space-time setting. Now, the way we interact, communicate or establish cultural exchanges is indirect, and is mediated by technologies (García Canclini, 2012).

In today's world, social networks play a crucial role. Online platforms for social interaction have served to blur the boundaries between the self and the other, thanks to strategies for fictional representation and self-representation which are then presented as realities on this medium.

Therefore, the present article focuses on those artistic manifestations that use social media to invent, imagine, create or

identify with new subjectivities, using identities created specifically in the context of web 3.0.[1] These identities are invented by users in order to be exposed and perceived as a self/other, from the metaphysical perspective of alterity, or the ability to be other. In 1961, Emmanuel Levinas, in *Totality and Infinity*, put forward "the idea of Infinity in us". Infinity appears as a space where otherness can come about, the place where beings can transcend and express their externality thanks to the inherently infinite nature of difference. Levinas (1979) goes on to explain: "It is not the insufficiency of the I that prevents totalization, but the Infinity of the Other" (p. 80). This is why the artistic practices selected here feature those who transcend themselves, allowing different identities to be outwardly expressed.

The individuals in today's globalised society feel the constant need to be identified by others, to project a self-image and recognise themselves in it. However, this action becomes increasingly arduous, because identities are not static - they transform as and when the individual experiences, learns and advances. Therefore, it becomes the more feasible exercise of spotting-the-difference between these states.

> The search for identity is an ongoing struggle to arrest or slow down the flow, to solidify the fluid, to give form to the formless. [. . .] Identities are more like the spots of crust hardening time and time again on the top of volcanic lava which melt and dissolve again before they have time to cool and set (Bauman, 2000, pp. 82-3).

Essentially, the globalised aesthetic is about the rapid obsolescence and the constant regeneration and disappearance of not only works of art, but also any object that has been designed for or allocated to a fixed timeframe, and so, over time, each version has undergone gradual changes and adaptations to its new surroundings and

[1] Web 3.0 is the term used to describe the evolution of web 2.0 towards a greater degree of interaction and participation by Internet users, and the creation of online content is possible without the need to use a browser.

contexts. Thus, the constant renovation of the symbolic and the aesthetic reflects a key feature of today's society and communication.

3. Mobility in the virtual space: places and non-places

In this context, it is important to highlight the two main elements involved in the so-called 'mobility turn'. On the one hand there is the physical and more natural aspect of movement, and on the other, its symbolic and political side, the result of issues caused by the growth in cognitive capitalism in which social networks have become a key player. The present article will focus on this particular matter, as well as on the trends, as seen in recent decades, related to the exploration of digital spaces and virtual journeys by means of supposed non-bodily mobility on the Internet, in cyberspace (Barriendos, 2007). As noted by Remedios Zafra, cyberspace is a window through which to see the world, a space for adopting the models and templates with which we can construct ourselves, and it determines how we can think and be in any given physical space (Zafra, 2010).

Nevertheless, in cyberspace, where artistic interventions are carried out, reductive issues such as origin or nation must be left aside. The Internet is a space conceived as a 'non-place' (Augé, 1995):

> Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten (Augé, 1995, p. 79).

As Marc Augé indicates here, places (physical, natural and palpable) and non-places (intangible and virtual) are both areas for the construction of identities, life stories and the forming of many different kinds of relationships. Therefore, the feeling of inhabiting a non-space is perhaps akin to the feeling of the sublime

as described by Kant in 1764: to experience, on the edge of the abyss, a sensation that is simultaneously pleasurable and terrifying, as different as night and day (Kant, 2003). This inhabiting of an unexplored and unknown space is, for art today, a cause of elevated and ideal emotions. Being active in the virtual space brings about this feeling of sheer uncontrollable pleasure – attracted by the blue light[2] of the screen, in the supposed intimacy of a private space, Internet users teeter on the precipice of this vast global cyberspace, still largely unknown, and they are ready and willing to be devoured by it.

At first, the Internet and the social networks were a research area for art, and society completely took on and assimilated this new method. Following this, the social networks became a space in which artistic practices could express, invent and explore, without having to question the potential growth of these technologies.

Today, the Internet, social media and technologies have been fully popularised and democratised, and therefore we cannot speak exclusively of an 'Internet art' (as we could with net.art in the nineties) when researching this new medium. Not only artists, but all those involved in the art process use social media indiscriminately, whether for expression, creation, transgression or subversion. This generalisation shows that there are new interests, and new possibilities for coming up with artificial landscapes, scenarios and characters, leading to a controversial, captivating and fictitious reality.

In the second phase of web 2.0, the stark dividing wall between the transmitter and the receiver is knocked down, and there is a blurring of the boundaries between those who control information,

[2] Light is made up of different coloured rays. Each ray in the visible spectrum has a different wavelength - ultraviolet rays have the shortest wavelength (they are part of the non-visible spectrum), and infrared rays have the longest. Blue light is at the limit between the visible and the non-visible to the human eye, and it is very attractive. This light can be emitted by both natural and artificial means, and, notably, it is used in all the screens of digital devices, managing to absorb all of our attention.

on the one side, and the passive public on the other. As a result, the broadcast media outlets and those who were previously the receivers soon began to use the same tools for transmission. This led to a democratisation and hyper-expansion of information, something which Marshall McLuhan had predicted in terms of mass media, as Susan Sontag quotes: "The media have substituted themselves for the older world. Even if we should wish to recover that older world we can do it only by an intensive study of the ways in which the media have swallowed it" (Sontag, 1977/2005, p. 158).

Similarly, the merging of information and communication technologies with the electronic revolution, globally, leads to a fundamental change: the introduction of these technologies into people's daily lives. This rapid development becomes a double-edged sword: on the one hand, the more traditional mass media outlets (such as radio and television networks) seize on it, contributing thus to a homogenisation of the media landscape, and on the other hand, the recipient masses edge closer to emancipation and the widespread availability of information (Martín Barbero, 1987).

The worldwide crisis caused by Covid-19 has made us scramble to update our knowledge and usage of social media. This applies both to those who had previously refused to use these networks, and those who did use them but who have since had to adapt, i.e. by using them not only as a stage or space for exhibiting their private lives, but also for a kind of connectivity that seeks to resemble direct, physical connection, not quite so far removed from reality. Thus, the democratisation of the Internet cannot solely be ascribed to the universal availability of information - the two-way flow of social media is also crucial, as it allows people to generate communication with each other, and form communities. In this sense, the so-called 'blogosphere' plays a fundamental role as a social tool (Martín Prada, 2015). Blogs help us understand that information comes from people and, therefore, it will always have a subjective bias. However, the rise of new participatory communities, in which freedom of expression and opinion is encouraged, allows information to be active and

diverse, and it is understood collectively. As a result, this information becomes knowledge.

This setting offers a space for equally privileged relations between individuals, collectives or companies; all users are placed on a hyperconnected horizontal plane, and so artistic practice moves away from the establishment, the predominance of the institution and the selected elite of the traditional art world.

Hardt and Negri put forward theories on globalisation, borrowing concepts such as the 'rhizome' from Guattari and Deleuze (1988) and liquid postmodernity from Bauman (2006). In *Empire* (2000), they warned us that we ought to shift our focus. In the flexible, indeterminate macrostructure that represents the 'Empire', the multitude becomes the main political power in the end. The multitude is not simply comprised of nations and individuals coming together, but rather it is the particular power of a "new city" (Hardt & Negri, 2000). A new global city, inhabited by a new kind of citizenship made up of the connected multitude, whose *telos* is their own recognition as a political subject and whose main tool of action is the network system.

In this sense, no political subject can reasonably be considered as existing outside of the increasing spectacularisation of this postmodern society. The incessant sharing of lives on social networks turns truth into theatre and creates simulations, generating infinite connections between the self and the other. As a result, stereotypes of representativity emerge:

> The alienation of the spectator to the profit of the contemplated object (which is the result of his own unconscious activity) is expressed in the following way: the more he contemplates the less he lives; the more he accepts recognizing himself in the dominant images of need, the less he understands his own existence and his own desires. The externality of the spectacle in relation to the active man appears in the fact that his own gestures are no longer his but those of another who represents them to him. This is why the

> spectator feels at home nowhere, because the spectacle is everywhere (Debord, 1967, p. 11).

From Debord's theory, we can infer that we all form part of the spectacle; the domestic is overexposed, to the detriment of privacy, and our own representativity becomes stagnated until, ultimately, we are trapped in standards that are lauded by the online society, and ruled by a boundless theatrocracy.

This theoretical framework places us on both sides of a mirror, in which the reflection of reality is artificial, and, likewise, the invented becomes reality. Fictions and realities are merged into the same virtual truths.

4. The 'selfie' as a producer of digital identity

Ever since they first appeared, humans have sought to leave evidence of their existence. Compelled by a kind of fear of being forgotten, we often want to be depicted, or to depict ourselves, in order to leave behind a trace or a memento of a particular moment.

Images allow time and space to stand still, so you can go back to that moment again and again. As Jose Luis Brea notes:

> This is because images themselves are suspended, static. They capture, and retain, a single moment – as opposed to a mirror, for example, which is always willing to be filled up with the next present moment that comes along, those ever-fickle mirrors – and make it timeless. And if they manage this, it is because their internal time – no, for them, there is no narration, no sequence of events – is exactly one, single, a frozen moment, suspended, static. (2010, p. 12)

The birth of photography makes artists rethink the possibilities of representation in art. Photography used to capture the present with the aim of remembering it in the future - that is, at first, photos

were taken in order to send a message to someone who was not there at that particular moment, like a memento for the future (Peraica, 2017).[3] As technologies developed, with the aforementioned arrival of the second era of Internet art and the rise of the blogosphere, this situation is turned on its head. The users of social networks such as Instagram create images (photos of places or things, portraits or self-portraits) to be shared immediately; these images are created so that the message reaches a subject at the same moment, like proof of the existence of the self.

Roland Barthes explains how everything changes just when you are being observed by a camera lens (or a smartphone, for the current context); you are forced to strike a pose which instantaneously transforms you into another body, into an image (1981, pp. 10-11). When posing in front of a camera, we take on the role of photographer, we put ourselves in the other's shoes to try to imagine what they want to see reflected in the screen of their digital device. Therefore, when a subject takes a self-portrait, a selfie, with their smartphone, there is a multiplication of roles: they pose exactly how they want to be seen, based on preconceived conventions. But, is there really anything social about the social networks, given that users take part in them with their own individual devices, alone in a private space or alone in the remoteness of the self, there inside the device? And why is there a constant desire for self-representation? Juan Martín Prada suggests, in *New Media Egologies*, that, today, pleasure must necessarily arrive via the image, and more specifically, via the selfie, which Prada has termed the 'ego-photo' (2016, p. 1).

> In our online presence we have to be, at all times, capable of demonstrating that we are the possessors of our "own" life. And as paradoxical as it might seem, it would appear that, on the network, life only becomes your own when it has been shared, as if nothing [is] worthwhile if it is not shared as an image, if it does not take on

[3] Ana Peraica cites the ideas proposed by Barthes in his text *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981).

> that distributed and circulatory dimension that makes it the object of a collective expectation (Martín Prada, 2016, p. 2).

This form of interaction is completely integrated and assimilated by the connected multitude, now more than ever, since physical interpersonal relationships have been forced to go virtual. As Martín Prada indicates, lived experiences or situations seem unimportant if they are not exhibited and shared on the Internet. In these times of the pandemic, our lived experiences are shared, they are very similar. We place ourselves in a corner of a room that best represents the domestic image we would like to project, putting across an ideal vision of the home or place of leisure. If this behaviour is repeated, we discern the image of a fragmented self as a shared truth.

Throughout this text, and in other publications that discuss the Internet, there are constant references to the 'user' as an omnipresent entity. Kurt Caviezel, in his 2006 series *The Users,*[4] aimed to find out who these 'users' really were. They exhibited themselves online, via webcam, allowing thus other Internet users to watch a livestream of their identity and individuality. They perhaps sought to emphasise and restate the truth value of their daily lives that were being broadcast, behind an ever-changing mask, to the connected masses. Is there such a thing, then, as social interaction in reality?

5. Modelled identities – real or invented?

Ever since Cindy Sherman started to appropriate the images of women as projected in 1960s Hollywood films, many artists have used and still make use of appropriation in order to call into question those identities that are based on stereotypes and conventions.

However, this accumulation of predetermined models of identity does not only come about in the self-representation of individuals, but also in the form of monuments, objects and places.

[4] http://www.kurtcaviezel.ch/theusers/index.html

Social networks (platforms like Facebook, Instagram or Flickr) are a fervent repository of private images that are manipulated, in a certain sense, by their own authors/producers who themselves end up becoming a homogenised set of attitudes, poses, gestures and approaches.

We could redefine digital identity as the extent of the user's ability to create characters and exhibit them online, like creating an alter ego. As such, each user can create multiple identities, ultimately becoming an expansive and omnipresent being thanks to their shared characteristics.

The creation of invented digital identities lets us blend into the crowd. Social networks allow us, as users, to take the fantasy of the imagined self and make it appear real, to liberally invent a life of our own and put it online, to show it to other users and share a fictional experience somehow based on reality, or at least inspired by real, physical life. A recurring idea within the artistic research into social media is that of making up characters, histories or experiences, with a view to exploring the subsequent reactions of other users.

Following the worldwide experience of the lockdown, the way we interact on social media has been consolidated. So much so that, depending on the social network in question, you can choose which of several identities you want to exhibit, in one of various possible ways. On Instagram, for example, the nicest or most successful version of any given alter ego is invariably the one chosen to appear. However, those networks based on private chats or video calls, like WhatsApp or Skype, are reserved for the subject's real identity, in its most intimate form. Different social networks are good for different things - they all serve a particular purpose.

On 19th April 2014, Amalia Ulman uploaded to her Instagram account an image titled 'Part I', which belonged to a series/project called *Excellences & Perfections*,[5] an initially ironic title that featured a successful digital identity created via an online performance. Over

[5] https://www.newmuseum.org/exhibitions/view/amalia-ulman-excellences-perfections

five months, the artist passes herself off as a celebrity, or rather she behaves like one, and she broadcasts this image on Instagram.

Due to her attention to detail in terms of scenography, props, costume, appearance and acting, Ulman manages to concoct the fantasy of a lifestyle of luxury, consumption and capitalist beauty standards. All of the images created to project this lifestyle are images of excess and absolute yet believable perfection, as often seen in the context of the social network. One of the possible aims of the project is to represent these social conventions right there in the context where such narratives are created. Social networks have shaken up the mass media, and even the art institutions. The power of aestheticising everyday life offers people the tools to rebuild and reinvent themselves via self-projections that are then validated by the other user-creators, through their 'likes'.

Therefore, over these five months, Ulman puts herself through simulated changes of image. Her actions prove that the platforms for online social interaction can transmit real-life invented stories that go unquestioned by the other users. The followers of this invented digital identity leave comments, sometimes flattering, other times more negative, or they post obscene replies to those photos which are more provocative or erotic in tone.

Furthermore, this work challenges the backwards idea of femininity being used to designate women who are delicate, weak and, ultimately, objectified – the manifestation of the female image as a figure who reiterates all the deeply-rooted stereotypes of women in the history of art.

The difference between Ulman's practice and that of other social network users is the intention. Just like her, many users put on make-up, prepare the backdrop and represent themselves as an invented and desired self, but their aim is to share the projection they have created of themselves, rather than an action that is subversive, critical and contemplative about subjectivity on social media. Users seek to export an image of themselves, a socially acknowledged and triumphant reflection of their persona. However, Ulman subverts

the act of self-representation by using the same tools and behaviour, since she does so from the perspective of the diffuse institution of 'art'. The main tool, which we are all aware of, is the aestheticisation of day-to-day life on social media, in this case Instagram, which, by means of filters, focuses and amateur composition, depicts a pretend reality.

Another example to help us interpret the construction of digital identities is *Born Nowhere* (2011),[6] in which Laís Pontes researches the creation of fictional identities. *Born Nowhere* explores how social media influences the construction of contemporary identity, whereby people who interact on Facebook create a profile that then becomes real when it starts to form social relationships on the network, and users react to those relationships. As such, Laís Pontes begins by posting doctored images of herself on Instagram. Each image suggests an appearance of and perhaps the automatic sociological association with a predetermined person. This is the starting point for this online participatory multi-performance in which the users take part in the creation of profiles, choosing their personality, dress sense, appearance, interests, etc. Ultimately, this leads to a rounded, convincing life story, as if it were the co-operative modelling of a piece of clay, as if the social network were Prometheus creating humanity.

Finally, this virtual and constructed identity is embodied within the artist's own physical reality, following the guidelines submitted by the users. In turn, the users, if they so wish, can create another version of the characters based on their own experience, bringing them to life themselves, in such a way that the physical realities of the characters keep on multiplying. From this research project, four characters created by connected users were born: Stacy, Amber, Shena and Julia.

This work shows the rupture caused by the blurring of roles on social media; the involvement of the users leads to a conversation with the self, where each participant personifies their concerns,

[6] https://www.bornnowhere.com/

anxieties, desires and personal issues. The idea of living through the other becomes a reality, trying to comprehend the other and oneself by examining the differences. This project starts off as 'somebody else's' but then becomes shared, and the artist is thus forced to become the spectator of her own artwork.

As Martín Prada (2015) notes, such online and collective artistic actions, such as the one described here, can perhaps be traced back to the surrealists' exquisite corpses, understood as a piece made by all of those involved, with common authorship.

Born Nowhere is alive, in constant evolution. Its own natural process and the expansion of its lines of research have led to the created characters transcending Facebook and going onto other networks too, as seen in *Girls on Instagram*, *Self and the Others* and *Virtual Mask*.

Elsewhere, the creator Intimidad Romero reacts, in her artistic practice, against the overexposure of digital identities by using, as her main tool, the acts of concealment and definitive 'unlabelling'. Hidden by pixellation are the identities of people from the artist's surroundings, there in limbo, with faceless profiles and unrecognisable identities. These identities go on to form part of a non-specific virtual reality. When Facebook detected this unknown profile, they requested the artist's passport in order to verify her identity, since Intimidad (i.e. 'intimacy', 'privacy') was not considered a valid name, and her account was ultimately blocked. As a result, the artist set up a new account under the name Inti Romero, which is still there today. The aim of this online performance is to subvert the forms of self-representation on the network – from a more general view of considering what is worthy of being shared on social media, to the denial of any possibility of seeing what is common to those private experiences that only acquire relevance when they are observed by other users.

This Facebook profile by Inti Romero[7] is similar, in terms of methodology and aims, to Petra Cortright's work and its themes

[7] https://es-es.facebook.com/intimidadromero

of overexposure and concealment. These two artists question the online trend of being labelled with a watertight identity, which raises doubts about the hyper-exposure of private lives as being a laudable value. In the case of Cortright, the artist satirises the kinds of attitudes found in videos shared on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook. By means of imitation, the artist questions users' desire to broadcast their virtual lives, while still retaining their privacy, a privacy which is absorbed by the extreme homogenisation of the forms of representation and composition. This issue concerns those images, floating around in the network system, that have been posted by their protagonists as proof of an experience. They are shared because of an impulse or need to spread this fact, which would otherwise have no reach or importance until the other users are given the simple chance to view it.

In this line, Penelope Umbrico searches for images tagged with common terms such as 'sunset', in *Suns from Sunsets from Flicker* (2006-present),[8] or 'full moon' in *Everyone's Photos Any License* (2015-16).[9] Compared with the relatively straightforward act of photographing the sun with a simple smartphone, getting a clear picture of the moon requires more specialised and expensive photographic equipment. Despite this, the artist finds, on Flickr, 1,146,034 images representing a splendid full moon, most of them with 'all rights reserved'. Each individual author considers their own photograph to be unique, but when observed all together, a million identical photos turn into a portrait of the mass of egos online, a reflection of the users and creators.

A completely different case is that of Lu Yang,[10] a young Chinese artist and influencer who brings together a schizophrenic accumulation of characters and forms that have emerged from cultural hybridisation (anime and eastern mythology), from technological proliferation (typical of countries that are more

8 http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/suns/

9 http://www.penelopeumbrico.net/index.php/project/flickr-moons/

10 http://luyang.asia/

developed and dependent on technology, such as China and Japan), and from pop music, virtual reality and the gaming subculture.

Her creation is a clear celebration of the new degree of autonomy which, since the arrival of the Internet, has been possible in terms of the construction of identity. Subjectivity on the Internet is free from the burden of determining factors such as nationality, gender, sexuality or any other abbreviated form of identity. The result is a saturation that is emotive, iconographic and spiritual, aspiring to seek new visions of the metamorphosis and construction of subjectivity. Lu Yang is of particular interest in this context, because, as well as being an artist, she is an influential personality on Chinese and Japanese social media. In her projects, she fuses digital reality with the physical space in a kind of Frankenstein's monster which rejects being perceived as either online or offline, and instead is characterised by a hyper-expansive and unexplored imagination.

We create our identity on social networks by means of an accumulation of images of self-representation, which convey to the interlocutor our likes, our personality, what activities we do and even what we eat, if and when we decide that it is worthy of being shared on the network as our 'self'. This identity is invented and virtual, enhanced in accordance with the socially predominant stereotypes of the physical, real self.

These stereotypes, which the online masses hope to reproduce, are created and reinforced thanks to, or despite, the comments posted by social media users and the sharing of images that convey success. This comment culture has been strongly boosted by social networks such as Twitter, where a thought, feeling, opinion or idea are summed up in a few short words. This sparks off a trend for creating shallow micro-truths via just a few words and a picture, promoting the access to information with little depth, the kind of information made of real-time headlines that, within minutes, have already become obsolete. Therefore, the fervent activity of microblogs makes the user feel permanently up-to-date and connected with the whole world of the Internet.

Susan Sontag explains, in her essays *On Photography* (1977), that we would struggle to think of tourism as separate from photography – following the rise of international holidays around the mid-20th century, the camera became increasingly indispensable. Today, it would be unthinkable to go on a trip or a particular experience without taking an electronic device that allows us to take photos of ourselves, albeit in an amateurish way, that can later be exhibited on social media. The maxim is *I am what I share*; once exhibited online, we feel accepted by the connected masses. This is where the trend towards instantaneity comes from: right now I am thinking this, I am this, I look like this, I am doing this. As such, we are witnessing a phenomenon where the simultaneous and immediate sharing of images of a user's supposed activity is what defines a given identity's (be it either real or fake) degree of success on the network, due to the dizzyingly rapid obsolescence of information and its being constantly updated. Online images and videos, which are shared either in real time or afterwards, persuasively insinuate that what has happened is important, because they have been deemed worthy of being seen by others, and so they gain an aura of immortality.

6. Epilogue

Are we perhaps living again in Plato's cave, that place where reality was a simple yet misleading reflection of the truth?

Walter Benjamin said that the here and now of the original is what constituted the essence of its authenticity (1968). With the development in information technologies and communication, and the technological revolution, there is an urgent need to explain these philosophical axioms in further depth so that we might adapt to the new context. The difference lies in the fact that the here and now of the original artwork, in this age of social networks, is ubiquitous. In the age of technological reproducibility, as proposed by Benjamin, the work of art was taken away from a fixed location

because of photography, cinema or devices such as gramophones, which allowed audio to be listened to in a place other than where the music or audio was first played or created. Furthermore, Benjamin states that technological reproducibility is what curtails the aura of the artwork (1968). Nevertheless, artistic experiences such as those discussed throughout this article have not only lost their glowing aura (thanks to the subversion of the systems of representation and to the diverse use of tools offered by the Internet) but they also evince users' most common online practices: the sharing of private lives on social media, and the construction of subjectivities.

Similarly, we can make out some degree of truth in the projections of the self that are posted on the platforms for social interaction. The externalisation of identity, channelled by digital means, results in the expression of ideal models of representation and self-representation. The images we share of ourselves have ended up forming a slippery slope towards homogenisation. The idea of 'how I want the other to perceive me' is based on standards that are accepted by society, and increasingly assimilated into it.

The aforementioned ubiquity is what allows the physical and the real to become blurred with the digital and invented, that non-place which facilitates the construction of multiple identities. The non-place is the non-specific place where the self is kept at a certain distance, far enough away so that we can shed our skin and design a different self. Alterity is what allows the self to construct subjectivity, a subjectivity that can only be truly expressed on the social network.

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Three Decades of Art, Feminism and the Internet[1]

Remedios Zafra

> The atomic wind catches your wings and you are propelled backwards into the future, an entity time travelling through the late C20th, a space case, an alien angel maybe, looking down the deep throat of a million catastrophes.
>
> [. . .] The hot contagion of millenia fever fuses retro with futro, catapulting bodies with organs into technotopia . . . where code dictates pleasure and satisfies desire.[2]
>
> VNS Matrix, 1996

> [. . .] a future in which the realization of gender justice and feminist emancipation contribute to

1 An initial version of this article was published in the book *Ciberfeminismo. De VNS Matrix a Laboria Cuboniks*, co-edited by Teresa López-Pellisa and Remedios Zafra, and published by Holobionte in 2019.

2 VNS Matrix, 'Bitch Mutant Manifesto', 1996.

> a universalist politics assembled from the needs of every human, cutting across race, ability, economic standing, and geographical position. No more futureless repetition on the treadmill of capital, no more submission to the drudgery of labour, productive and reproductive alike, no more reification of the given masked as critique.[3]
>
> Laboria Cuboniks, 2015

In the early nineties, the 'new world disorder' that was cyberspace came through a modem and infiltrated various different layers of our identities and bodies. In fact, we already knew the implications of dressing as a man or as a woman, but we didn't know what it meant to wear this cybernetic space. Even so, we soon worked out that, on the screen, we could shed the clothes that are forced upon us, create others, try to address everything that is misunderstood or hidden away or curtailed about identities, ditch our corsets and, somehow, spread our wings on the Internet.

There was a turn-of-the-century buzz in the air. Right there and then, just like a virus, there was an outbreak of uninhibited and impertinent "saboteurs of big daddy mainframe", i.e. women who loved technology and who were fed up of being excluded from its shared imaginary. They called themselves 'cyberfeminists' and they sought to "[rupture] the symbolic from within" (VNS Matrix, 1991).

At that time, the 1980s cyberculture and the burgeoning Internet revolution had given rise to a feminist alliance, packed with creative *technotopias* about women and technologies, about the relations, politics, dangers and power of the Internet for those women who, until that point, had otherwise been the typists, secretaries, assemblers, go-betweens and productive cogs in the machines, the subalterns who would ensure the continued reproduction of the system.

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[3] Laboria Cuboniks, 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation', 2015 <https://laboriacuboniks.net/manifesto/xenofeminism-a-politics-for-alienation/>

Early cyberfeminism came about via the critique of high-tech culture, exploring the social construction of post-body sexuality and identity in cyberspace, critiquing (by means of fiction, too) the propagation of those forms of power which had served to alienate women from technology and its culture. Cyberfeminism condemned the fact that the symbolic and economic powers-that-be effectively pushed women away from technological production and ideation, restricting them to the domestic and more precarious sector. Thus, cyberfeminists rebelled against the cold, clinical procedure of dividing up work based on sex, and the politically regressive effects of this on women. But cyberfeminism also asserted that the new devices and technologies for intersubjective connection and mediation brought with them the potential for great personal and collective impact, which might eventually transform and bolster women's dissenting against the age-old roles assigned by society.

All of this because: who was the tech world really going to give opportunities to? Who could they tie down, and whose wings would be smothered by pretty dresses, by aestheticisation, blackmail and precariousness? How might the Internet and connected devices change the history of women? Would cyberculture ensure that history keeps repeating itself, or might it lead to the world's feminist transformation?

In the last thirty years, the Internet has changed - and feminism too. We are speaking less about *cyberculture* and more about *digital culture*, but words are only one part of it. Today, the world pulses in an irreversibly connected way, and everything is prone to being turned into data and weary resignation. As subjects, made more of pixels than flesh, we never stop producing, and we store things while viewing (without batting an eyelid) a ready-framed world, as if the screen itself were 'the world', to distract us from the actual planet's death throes. Capitalism and the patriarchy drive a whole machinery that reinforces forms of power and the shared imaginary within science and technology,

overlooking the fact that all the people who invent and rule over the 'digital house' are still strikingly similar-looking. Furthermore, their imaginary undervalues certain groups and keeps on giving subordinate roles to those who, if it continues like this, have the most to lose under the technoliberal agenda: girls, women, the poor, and queer people.

Following these last three decades, any reader would be forgiven for being sceptical about all of the above, since we already know the road that the Internet and the world have both taken. However, with the benefit of hindsight, we are now able to plot the path taken by these discourses and strategies: from the liberating and cyborg utopias of the nineties and the dystopias that directly descended from science fiction and cyberpunk, to the discourses on emancipation, empowerment, life and work that have been posited in recent years when we talk about women and technology.

This passing of time is reflected here in two names that mark a beginning and a continuity of cyberfeminism. First, there is the group of Australian women artists VNS Matrix and their 'Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century' (1991), and then later the collective Laboria Cuboniks and her[4] manifesto 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation' (2015). They are united by their use of masks as a political strategy, and they both combine forms of activism with different creative and speculative approaches, as well as their shared belief in the manifesto as a force for mobilisation and cohesion. But, in particular, the prominence that both collectives give to the 'future',[5] to the imagination and to the strategic and feminist

[4] Note that Laboria Cuboniks, as a collective, uses the singular pronouns she/her.

[5] For Laboria Cuboniks, the future is an essential part of her speculative work, strongly influenced by the more progressive forms of acclerationism. The manifestos of VNS Matrix are full of explicit references to the future and other veiled references which recall associated iconography, such as Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*: "There is a painting by Klee called Angelus Novus. An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring

use of technologies in order to 'redesign' the world is what most unites them.

Meanwhile, if we had to identify some of the roots of cyberfeminism I think they would be like those suggested by Virginia Woolf: "I am rooted, but I flow" (Woolf, 1987, p. 259), i.e. we would find that the same names always come back around. Specifically, and inspiringly, there is Donna Haraway with 'A Cyborg Manifesto', first published in 1985, and whose fundamental influence still runs through most of the texts discussed here, which are inspired by Haraway's proposals and often use them as the theoretical basis for cyberfeminist practice. This particular root can also be seen clearly in the aforementioned VNS Matrix, in their manifestos and creative work, and then in *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (1998) by the British theorist Sadie Plant. These latter two were decisively influenced by both Haraway and French feminist philosophy of the second half of the 20th century. Among others, the work of Luce Irigaray has been crucial for Sadie Plant and her view of digital technology as 'orphan' technology (insomuch as it is emerging technology capable of evolving while betraying its origins), which is used as an argument for her theoretical work.

With these references in mind, cyberfeminism itself begins to see the light when, in 1991, VNS Matrix infiltrate the term into their discourse of resistance against the predominant virtual information systems. Its infiltration came about in the form of manifestos, actions and parodic, cybererotic and critical iconographies which claimed to want to sabotage "big daddy" (the mainframe computer). These girls, precarious and bored of the world, were characterised by their bold and brash impertinence, inspired by cyberpunk. They

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at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. [. . .] The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm." (Benjamin, 1969, p. 249).

decided to mock and critique technological power without resorting to victimisation, in tune with what was happening elsewhere in the world.

From the mid-nineties, cyberfeminism, now stimulated by artistic and theoretical contexts, as seen in the Old Boys Network platform (OBN) – which for years operated as the beating heart of cyberfeminism and whose archive is still greatly valuable – came to view cyberspace as a territory full of new possibilities and challenges for women and the future, where its horizontally-organised structure encouraged the imagining of new creative, social and political conditions, so as to avoid reiterating old power models.

It is true that the cyberfeminist discourses of that time were highly localised and 'modem-connected', and also that they made use of the language of empire. Despite the fact that many of that decade's emblematic texts were written in different languages, such as the '100 anti-theses' created collectively in the First Cyberfeminist International (1997), most of the debates and publications were usually released in English. This is why we should celebrate the fact that Holobionte (Barcelona) published *Ciberfeminismo. De VNS Matrix a Laboria Cuboniks* (i.e. 'Cyberfeminism: From VNS Matrix to Laboria Cuboniks', 2019), a work that compiles and translates, into Spanish, many of the principal works of cyberfeminism. It should be celebrated, furthermore, that cyberfeminism, as a cyborg creature, is of mixed heritage, that she supports the global South and she likes crossing borders. It is therefore unsurprising that, today, Latin America is the cultural context where girls and women have most powerfully appropriated cyberfeminism as a way of approaching their political activism, on social media and using technology.

1. On cyberfeminist methods and creativity

> The first thing a feminist critic can do is to acknowledge the aporias and the aphasias of theoretical frameworks and look with hope in the direction of (women) artists.
>
> Rosi Braidotti, 1996

What we think and write cannot be reduced to a hegemonic form of expression, be it science or philosophy. Forms of expression have implicit warp threads, and some have bigger gaps between the individual threads than others. Sometimes the resulting fabrics are densely woven, and there is not much room for internal movement. Other fabrics, with a more open structure, let more air through. I believe that each theoretical warp structure includes a way of both illuminating and casting shade upon what it comes across, avoiding spaces that are devoid of curiosity and doubt, or else stimulating them. I consider art to be very openly-structured, that is, it can help us uncover and question the logics that dictate why light or darkness is cast in a certain part of the world, and help us reach our own conclusions.

Feminism has put this idea into practice by making use of art, in combination with theory, especially in cyberspace and the technological context, where women have positioned themselves as the bearers of deconstruction and critique, seeking to reveal not a particular feminist truth, but rather the forms and strategies used by the technological powers-that-be to create and normalise certain oppressive forms of truth.

This is reciprocal, and in recent art the central role of the feminist debate has not gone unnoticed, and nor has, in particular, the debate regarding the technological and digital sphere (cyberfeminism, technofeminism, post-feminism, transfeminism, cyberpunk, post-porn, *geek grrrrl* and *riot grrrl* activism, among others).

Another reason for this link between art and feminism is that the realms of the factitious, of representation and artificiality, such as art, are the best place for discovering and bringing together the contradictions of identity formulation, and all its fluctuations as a shifting process, when we rebel against identity stereotypes. Making these contradictions visible is possible in the field of creation, where the symbolic and the imaginary converge, and the subject is held up as a fragment of the artificial. Similarly, it is not insignificant that art is one of the few areas where contradictions can coexist unreservedly; art favours openness in cultural and technological construction, so interrogation and curiosity are seen as ways to spark awareness and encourage political action that might bring about actual social *contagion* and change.

On the other hand, in the creative field everything is considered potentially malleable, even the past. The same past which women are not *nostalgic* about, because they invariably see an image of their own exclusion as subjects and the trivialisation of issues related to them. Therefore, without this nostalgia for the past, creative practice allows feminism to do be contemplative about it without victimhood or pain, while still allowing feminism to move towards the future, i.e. that other territory of fiction and 'becoming' of subjectivity, and thus be able to imagine it, be able to imagine *oneself*.

This affinity also reveals an interesting coincidence: if art is a realm of the factitious and artificial, then so is technology. An artificiality which, in the case of screens and interfaces, has a pointed poetic and semantic intensity shared with art, insomuch as they all operate as 'frames of fantasy'. In this field, and backed up by recent cultural debate, the feminisms oriented towards technology have coincided in their defence of the political and aesthetic power of the networks and interfaces as a cyborg setting, a place where the body is deferred and always mediated (potentially intervened) by a screen, a place where genders and bodies can be transcended in a post-gender world, a world possibly plagued by differences, but not necessarily by inequalities.

With these approaches in mind, cyberfeminist artists find the Internet to be an unprecedented field for political and poetic action, where the patriarchy can be critiqued not only with a discourse but also by means of the creative dismantling of its codes and writings. This is an attempt at turning symbolic action into effective action, so that, just as the 20th century avant-garde movements indicated, the barriers between art and life can finally be torn down.

As such, while the link between art and feminism can be seen in many women creators of the last century, it has in fact been indispensable for cyberfeminism. It suggests thus an image of activism as art, and activism as one of the guiding principles and complex forms of symbolic and poetic production (as also proposed in the nineties by the Theatre of Electronic Resistance, with their actions of solidarity and political critique).

In fact, there is one element that often gets overlooked in the cyberfeminist debate, that I would like to illustrate here. I refer to the fact that the history of early cyberfeminism ran in parallel with *net.art*,[6] that critical and creative Internet-based artistic practice which featured some of the boldest and most lucid works of art from the nineties, in practically the same contexts where cyberfeminism was being developed.

In terms of cyberfeminist creativity, we can find specific examples from its early days, when cyberfeminist artwork looked to the critique of lineal and excluding logics, typical of classical power discourses. Proponents of cyberfeminism sought to eschew those barriers to entry and methodologies that belonged to a logocentric discourse logic, and this is essentially why they would constantly refuse to define themselves (a characteristic shared with the artistic practice *net.art*).

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[6] By *net.art* I refer to the artistic practice that emerged on (and about) the Internet in the nineties, as discussed in my article 'El instante invisible del net.art' (i.e. 'The Invisible Instant of net.art', Aleph, 1999). See also Martín Prada (2001).

The manifestos of VNS Matrix and the Old Boys Network (OBN) both came from artistic approaches and contexts. On the one hand, VNS's manifestos were a satirical and irreverent attempt at shaking up the realities of the relationship between women and cyberspace, by suggesting other possibilities. They were influenced by science fiction, automatic writing and the excitement for a new millennium, speculating about a post-gender and post-body vision, a future that was anybody's, yet to be decided. A chance to resist against the same old male power, against the logic of rationality and mythology that had been taken on, with barely any pushback from within the tech culture.

Elsewhere, in 1997 the artist Cornelia Sollfrank organised an emblematic debate on feminism and technology in the Hybrid WorkSpace at documenta in Kassel (Germany), one of the most important international art fairs. This debate gave rise to OBN, a platform to promote cyberfeminism and its international alliance. Over the following years, OBN constantly changed internally, and dozens of people became involved. Back then, cyberfeminism needed to deal with its self-definition issues by means of creative attitudes towards the Internet and towards feminism, and what emerged from these debates was an attempt to define the term by stating what it was not. This led to a manifesto of anti-definitions that was more like a methodology, halfway between the artistic and the political, and which, in any case, vaunted its own fluidity and affirmation as a statement of strategies, aims and intentions. Regarding the anti-theses, they declared that, whatever cyberfeminism 'is' or 'might be', it will always require some kind of agent to appropriate it for more effective political action. As such, Faith Wilding emphasised the advantages of self-definition to create "crucial *solidarity* in the house of difference" (Wilding, 1998), which is even better than consensus or *unity*.

These debates did have their detractors, who called for greater political precision. This criticism would later inspire new versions of the anti-theses, i.e. projects such as the '*n* hypotheses' by Helen

Hester[7] and her *post-cyber feminist* proposals, or the division of subRosa that was particularly focused on social activism.

With regards to OBN, it is striking how, as well as the (educated) genius culture of the solitary 'geek', there is a whole tradition in tech culture based around conventions, meetings and groups of friends which can create sprawling support networks for men. There was no real equivalent infrastructure for women, so they had to be built from scratch. This particular absence was highlighted by the cyberfeminists' critique of the *old boys' network* dynamic (hence OBN), a phrase that only exists in the masculine form, and so was appropriated and subverted by this early platform.

As can be seen, cyberfeminist methods not only include manifestos and anti-definitions, but also strategies based on parody, irony, simulation or political-poetic figurations, in order to imagine new possible ways of creating and working towards emancipation. They also seek to form intersections with an infinite number of *others*, helping to generate critical distance, internal conflict, self-esteem in those who have been belittled, and power in the subordinated. They try to raise awareness of certain problems or agents or inequalities and make them visible, because when they are visible they suddenly have a name and they can exist, they can have a voice and they can react. Some of these methods of feminist creativity have been further worked on by theorists such as Rosi Braidotti, particularly in her text 'Cyberfeminism with a Difference' (1996).

Today, a great many of cyberfeminism's creative strategies have been appropriated outside of the art world. The strong sense of irony that is typical of these early works can still be seen in more recent proposals, such as *Akelarre Ciberfeminista/ Santoral ciberfeminista* (2017),[8] a multimedia parody project

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[7] See Helen Hester, (2017). 'After the Future: n Hypotheses of Post-Cyber Feminism'. *The Kathy Rae Huffman Archive Catalogue*, also published in Spanish by Holobionte in their volume on *Ciberfeminismo* (2019).

[8] Akelarre Ciberfeminista, 2017. https://akelarreciberfeminista.noblogs.org/

where female saints and virgins from the collective religious imagination are swapped out for women scientists, theorists and real cyber-activists.

2. On digitalisation as new feminisation

> The clitoris is a direct line to the matrix.
>
> VNS Matrix, 1991

> And when 'computer' was a term applied to flesh-and-blood workers, the bodies which composed them were female. Hardware, software, [. . .] – before their beginnings and beyond their ends, women have been the simulators, assemblers and programmers of the digital machines.
>
> Sadie Plant, 1997

One of the most inspiring works for late-nineties cyberfeminism was the book *Zeros + Ones* by Sadie Plant. In her essay we can find various similarities with VNS Matrix, associating cyberfeminism with the intimate and subversive "relationship between women and technology". Some have claimed that the essay is far too 'optimistic' in its outlook (Plant herself has admitted that, to a large extent, the liberating discourse of technology only applied to privileged women), but aside from that, I believe that her work offers some of the most interesting analogies between women and cyberculture. Among them, the link between "the feminisation and digitalisation of society". Plant defends this by setting out the reasons for a link between, on the one hand, the spread of non-linearity and the decentralisation itself of the network, and, on the other, the idea of *feminisation* in the simplest sense of the word: the toppling of power that is exerted by some people over others, in order to create horizontal power.

In her work, Plant also links typists with weavers, and she compares them with the pioneering work of Ada Lovelace.[9] Lovelace, an iconic figure who has been appropriated by cyberfeminism, is notable not only for her contributions as the first programmer, but also for the form of this contribution: her ideas were not presented in a typical scientific text or article, but rather jotted as footnotes to an article about Babbage's analytical engine, with whom Ada had been collaborating. This 'form' came to be seen as a subconscious metaphor for women's history on the peripheries.

Digitalisation also shares certain similarities with the footnote structure, and it has the node-like horizontalisation typical of a rhizome structure, suggesting thus ways of thinking and relating to each other that are not inherently vertical, as is the case of most roots. These are non-phallocentric forms that make us think, as Braidotti notes, of a new, *nomadic* political ontology, a form of political resistance that is linked to the post-human vision of subjectivity which, in the eighties, Donna Haraway set out in her cyborg theory.

From this reasoning, Sadie Plant looked into how gender-specific roles could be made irrelevant by technology, resulting in a collapse of the status quo. We would witness the rise of post-human and technological beings, who are not limited by the body's nature. This potential, as envisaged in digital technology, led Plant to another insightful analogy between the technological matrix and the female matrix, between digital binary code (zeros and ones) and the chromosomal structure (XY). From her speculative approach, she deduced the potential overthrowing of the binary logic of sexual identity by making use of infinite combinations of the digitalised zeros and ones.

This idea has brought about numerous parallels and affiliations between cyberfeminism and queer theory, and it is one of the conceptual bases expounded upon within the platform we created

[9] Ada Byron, or Ada Lovelace 1815-1852), was a British mathematician, considered the first programmer in history and a reference for cyberfeminism.

in 2009, for artistic research and practice into identity and networks. Its philosophy is detailed in the *X0y1* manifesto.[10]

Elsewhere, the various cyberfeminist takes on the digital feminisation of the culture were critical of the notions that used 'the feminised' to refer to all that which has been historically reviled, embellished and culturally assigned as 'what women do'. Cyberfeminists supported the use of technology as a way to reject the common principal of domination, as well as liberation from hegemonic thought patterns. Feminisation by means of successive movements, as Braidotti (1994) notes in *Nomadic Subjects*, rather than one single essential unit – this latter approach is to be rejected.

We must not forget how women's creations had been considered, historically, as the culture of the gynaeceum, of decoration, of lace. It was proclaimed, until recently, that the only area in which women could truly participate as equals was seduction, that ephemeral form of horizontalisation that even so was reliant on a hierarchy, insomuch as it was a brief (metaphorical or literal) foray away from verticality. Now that this has been pointed out, and due to the re-examination of the history of sex in our culture, feminism aims to dismantle the phallocracy and make a symbolic and material intervention, by means of hybrid practices that are not limited solely to art, activism or politics. Instead, as in cyberfeminism, such practices would span these fields.

Some of the early cyberfeminist works of *net.art* dealt with cyborg subjectivities that linked art, science and technology. For example, there is the emblematic *Brandon*[11] by Shu Lea Cheang, a polyphonic project that addresses the digital world's subversion of binary logic, in collaboration with other collectives and artists. It is based on the true story of the murder of a transgender person (Brandon), and articulated as a combined narrative piece about the

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[10] *X0y1*, platform for research and creative practice on identity and network culture, 2009-2015: www.remedioszafra.net/ebook-x0y1/

[11] *Brandon*, Shu Lea Chenag, 1998-1999: Navigation of the piece: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mu0YR32KM0M

wounds inflicted, by power structures, upon those people who do not conform to the hegemonic norms of sex, gender and sexuality. The real comes together with the fictional in this piece, as does the documentary-based with the plausible, poetical and hypertextual musings with theoretical reflection, the virtual with the physical installation. This project, teeming with constant references to the work of Foucault, documents different cases of pathologisation, surveillance, stigmatisation and reclusion by those people who are not included in the sex or gender binaries, nor in the heteronormative framework.

3. On screens and post-body subjectivity

> We know that many beings pass between a man and a woman; they come from different worlds, are borne on the wind, form rhizomes around roots; they cannot be understood in terms of production, only in terms of becoming.
>
> Deleuze and Guattari, 1988

What does being on the Internet mean for the symbolic configuration of identities and affinities, when bodies are replaced by the images of bodies? In an online world, there is always a 'frame of fantasy' in the middle, and there is a question about the kind of *reality* we see. The world comes to us ready-framed. Online technological devices always mediate a displacement, a being via the other.

Cyberfeminist art dealt with and fantasised about the digital construction of identity and gender. The possibility of artificially creating our own tailor-made body and personality was based on the absolute malleability of our online avatars. Furthermore, it was possible to dispense with picture-based avatars, and try out textual or more synaesthetic personalities, with or without a name. In

hindsight, I believe that non-visual[12] avatars were far more conducive to subjective deconstruction than, for example, the whole universe of social networks that revolve around one's own image, in video or photo, that so define today's Internet.

The first online creative projects to experiment with animated avatars (and which would later give rise to the online metaverses) were mostly artistic projects with a feminist slant. In these projects it was possible to choose your sex, sexuality, personality, and you could interact with others, thus going beyond the playful appearance of the project and recreating more elaborate futures and bodies, almost always mirroring postmodern perspectives and the experimentation with forms that were fragmented, disposable and fleeting, a rebuttal to the dangers of old dogmatic identities.

These strategies for identity-based (self-)creation relied on a kind of grafting, on the recontextualisation of fragments, copying and pasting, and they turned the interface, as a field of intersubjective mediation, into a new epistemological space for being. This leaving behind of appearances, on the screen, in oscillating images, meant leaving behind bodies and the material as screens of protection/projection in themselves. On the Internet, we no longer had a body to hide behind, but rather a multipurpose interface to act with, a place where the determining factors of age or sex, out in the physical world, seemed to be dismantled in their material structure. That seemed to be the case, but it was not.

In line with this, up to the early 2000s there was a proliferation of all kinds of cyberfeminist projects that concocted new virtual imaginations for political subjectivity, influenced by Haraway's post-body and post-gender cyborg philosophy.

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[12] Sandra Buchmüller and Gesche Joost develop this idea in their article 'Las consecuencias del "giro icónico" en las representaciones de género virtuales, ¿la traición de la utopía ciberfeminista?' (i.e. 'The Consequences of the 'Ironic Turn' in Virtual Gender Representations – Betraying the Cyberfeminist Utopia?') published in *X0y1*, 2010: www.remedioszafra.net/ebook-x0y1/

This matter was highlighted in *Mutation.Fem,*[13] a project by Anne-Marie Schleiner, based on a critique of the masculinisation of the videogame industry (both in terms of programming and the ensuing consumer profiles and shared imaginary), and which we might consider as a bridge between the two centuries. This project brought together different patches for videogames with female characters, faced with the overdose of testosterone that had inundated the games industry in the nineties. The idea was to address the context of the time, which was riddled with stereotypes and dominated by male fighters and pilots, until there was an injection of female protagonists. This surge, instead of bringing balance to the situation in order to create more diverse role models and attract potential female gamers, in fact descended into the sexualised fantasy of creating warrior cyber-girlfriends, or experimenting with the control over automatons, therefore doing nothing to try and broaden the demographics of consumers and programmers beyond the same young, straight white men. The proposition in *Mutation. Fem* was to disseminate, online, patches and modifications for these commercial videogames, to fracture the homogeneity of their clichéd profiles and experiment with the gender of the avatars, all in a peculiar workshopping of mutation and 'monster design', in which the woman is interpreted as just another monster (somewhere between "butch Drag Kings, Bob-Bettys and androgynous queens"). As well as the critique of representation, this project identifies the growth of support networks and 'clans' of women who were starting to contribute to a gaming culture for women.

As seen here, the cyberfeminists' demands regarding on-screen representation and subjective construction have been conditioned by the changes in the digital industry over the last two decades. After the first utopian search for deconstruction, via the intervention of the interface and the fluid games of anonymity and masks as in the early cyberfeminist art of the nineties, what

[13] *Mutation.Fem*, Anne-Marie Schleiner, 2000. http://www.opensorcery.net/mutation/

we are seeing now is an emphatic and capitalistic territorialisation of the Internet, its radical colonisation by the digital industries and, as a result, the renewed value placed on a more aestheticised on-screen identity. This identity is situated, controlled, recognised and validated by photo or video, a far cry from anonymity and masks, which are today not only avoided, but also stigmatised as a sign of 'suspicious behaviour'. The new imposed model is all about appearance and the hyper-exposure of the self, a self who poses in the real world, and is commodified on a network that is essentially a shop window.

It is true that, in today's prevailing context of aesthicisation and the body (which is not represented but *exposed*), there is room for diversity and otherness. However, it is worth remembering that the control and codes thereof are not regulated as something public and political, but rather they are managed by monopolies and mercantile logics that create the illusion of a bustling public square, whereas there is cash changing hands and these spaces are built for profit.

This is a multi-faceted debate, and, while masks and online anonymity are still cyberfeminist tools in those countries where women are denied fundamental rights, on a global level identity-based online representation can be defined by the way it tends to be absorbed by the act of 'exhibition'. A form of exhibition that goes hand-in-hand with the new and growing forms of fear and blackmail online, targeting the bodies of girls, queer people and women as everyday objects of harassment and violence, further exacerbated by society's lack of sex education. This kind of education is not dealt with, and so it is delegated to the clamour of the Internet and pornography, something which is mobilising current cyberfeminist collectives to launch campaigns and targeted actions.

4. On privacy and the new public-private sphere

With the Internet, the house is not what it used to be, the private is not what it used to be, time is not what it used to be. The old social fabric, held together by the requisite coexistence of place and time, has been torn apart. This means a reconfiguration of public and private spaces, and it implies a transformation of the gender-discriminating structures that placed women in domestic settings and jobs, hidden away in the invisible corners of the culture.

In fact, this used to be typical of western culture, i.e. to keep one's private life private. On today's Internet, there has been a U-turn: not only is the private not kept private anymore, the exhibition thereof is now incentivised. This is a complex matter, involving the aforementioned danger of the commodification of privacy and the promotion of the exhibited subject (who is turned into a marketable product, almost always fitting into old categories and who equips all kinds of spaces to allow the private self to be publicly exposed). However, as well as the dangers this poses for the domain of online privacy, there is an entirely different possible reading, a powerful possibility for cyberfeminism. I refer to the political impulse to expose the oppression that has kept women hidden away and silenced ("don't tell anyone", "this is between you and me", "what must they think about you", "don't air your dirty laundry". . .), oppression which has continually fed into the accepted lies that form the basis of their subordination and silencing.

Cyberfeminist activists make use of this possibility in order to draw attention to life stories and private issues in their networks, using their own power instead of power dictated by others. For example, they can pre-empt threats of extortion and being made to live in guilt or shame, because they have been educated in cases of harassment and violence both online and offline. The idea is to take the normalised, symbolic violence against women, the kind disguised as 'private matters', and make it public. That is, they hope to reveal the harmful aspects of private life, which, when collectivised, become

political. In turn, this is a form of empowerment, promoting empathy and fraternity among equals who, via their mass condemnation, can raise awareness of a systemic silence/problem. Because, again recalling Virginia Woolf, though it is unpleasant when doors slam shut and you are locked out, "it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (Woolf, 2001, p. 29).

This possibility challenges the old codes which demarcated private spaces, where forms of inequality, violence and oppressive power were legitimised and kept hidden, acceptable as long as they were 'unseen'. Today, the new public-private setting is appropriated in the irreversible use of social networking by the feminist alliance. We have seen this in recent years, with campaigns such as *#MeToo*, and other similar movements, in which women's real-life experiences of everyday violence are denounced and disseminated. The possibility of such phenomena spreading online, of going viral, has been revolutionary for those who had otherwise been living in fear, primed to feel guilty and scared: these women suddenly saw themselves reflected in others who had never previously spoken up, until 'now'.

In the West, staying quiet has long been considered a virtue in women. Societal conventions and prejudices account for a great many of the instances of silencing and subordination. For Victoria Camps, the type of ethics that applies to the public and private spheres is determined by the needs that people must satisfy (Camps, 1989). These needs are different in each historical era, and they allow us to observe dual or even 'multiple' morals: the morals that apply outside, on the other side of the door, and those which apply inside. Each era accepts certain 'accepted lies', with general tacit agreement, even if they are not stated in any texts or laws. Today, the Internet and feminism are exposing them.

Traditionally, private and impenetrable spaces have been demarcated, spaces where the things that speak volumes about the intimate freedoms of 'privacy', such as inequality and the power of certain people over others, can be swept under the carpet. This is

another example of the predominance of ocularcentrism and how much power it has over the private space. In other words, there is a difference between that which has been brought to light, and has been seen by the public, and that which just maintains the status quo and keeps the private under wraps, so it cannot be outwardly reacted to – i.e. all that which is outside the frame of the public gaze.

The house you cannot leave, and the body you cannot leave either. When one becomes aware of this, various 'ecstatic' strategies can be deduced, such as the ones identified by Virginia Woolf and referenced by Rosi Braidotti (1996) when discussing the need to kill the "angel in the house" (Braidotti, 1996), liberating the woman from having been reduced to the materiality of the body and domestic tasks, and so helping her claim back her *subjectivity*. There are also strategies for embodiment, such as the one referenced by Braidotti when she suggests the need to "bring down the angel from heaven", with regards to men, breaking the angels' abstraction and merely symbolic identification with humanness, helping them to become incarnate and to claim back a *materiality* that was lost in the process of their *humanness* being abstracted and stolen.

Making the private visible has also been ubiquitous in the feminist art of the last few decades, turning women's intimate, private life into the core of its representation, with recurring themes such as the body and the home, cages, domestic life, an infinite world of doors and rooms which one can enter but not always leave. Similarly, exposing and presenting the *abject* and hidden has also been an aesthetic and political resource, appearing regularly in recent feminist art. This can be seen in the prevalent iconography of the *vulva*, criticising how western culture has tended to demean it, thus stifling and pathologising women's sexuality.

These aesthetic and political forms endure on the Internet, boosted by the possibilities for the self-narration of intimate and private worlds. Making public that which, culturally, they teach us to experience as something private and unspeakable, whilst we are belittled and hurt by it, is a political issue. Because privacy too is

part of the culture of domination, drilled into us in such a way that acts of violence and intimidation bring shame to those who suffer them, and not to those who exert them. That is, violence is the very basis of so many private lives.

Exposing that which is hidden, and hurts, is a political gesture that is amplified when its protagonists come into contact with others who have gone through similar experiences. This is, I believe, the great (cyber)feminist revolution of this era, the formation of this global, online alliance of peers. And though exposing the private does leave us open to public scrutiny, it also liberates us from coercion, thwarting others' attempts to instrumentalise us.

5. On activism, imaginative apprehension and feminist future

> Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction. The international women's movements have constructed "women's experience", as well as uncovered or discovered this crucial collective object. This experience is a fiction and fact of the most crucial, political kind. Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility.
>
> Donna Haraway, 1985/2016

The construction of feminist consciousness is clearly a collective endeavour, but it is also imaginative construction. By this I mean that it must not limit itself to a critique of oppression without then proposing 'what is possible', without speculating on improved futures. And I believe that cyberfeminism can be a great ally in this issue, insomuch that the future is not something you can just skirt around or avoid, quite the opposite: cyberfeminists have engaged

with it using the power of irony, symbolic violence and considerable ingenuity.

The inclusion of fiction and art in early cyberfeminism has aided in this vision, but in the last two decades the artistic context has not been a restriction, but rather a starting point. Therefore, since the turn of the century, cyberfeminism has been taken up and used in a wide range of settings, outside of the artistic institution. This has included more theoretical aspects, such as that proposed by xenofeminism, and others that require creative activism, as in the collective subRosa, as well as those that are profoundly engaged with technosocial activism, like the initiatives by Donestech or EnRedadas.

Along this line of reasoning, subRosa might be a good example to help us link what happened in the nineties with the state of contemporary cyberfeminism. Led by the artists and teachers Faith Wilding and Hyla Willis, subRosa has presented itself as a mutable and cybernetic organisation, an example of a "reproducible cyberfeminist cell" made up of "cultural researchers committed to combining art, activism and politics", who explore "the intersection of the new information and biotechnologies on women's bodies, lives and work".[14]

Another more recent example is the collective Laboria Cuboniks,[15] who, via xenofeminism, assimilates and converses with cyberfeminism, "combining important theoretical speculation with audiovisual practices and media art". As well as cyberfeminism, xenofeminism is influenced by posthumanism, feminist materialism, accelerationism and neo-rationalism. It brings together a politics "without the infection of purity", seeking to go beyond the concepts of species, gender, race and class, proposing an alliance with all things 'strange' and defending a politics born of *alienation*, urging the reorientation of existing technologies so that they aim towards

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14 subRosa: http://www.cyberfeminism.net/

15 Anagram of 'Nicolas Bourbaki', anonymous pseudonym used by a group of mathematicians.

transforming the conditions of the current system's sociobiological oppression. To achieve this, Laboria Cuboniks seeks to bring back ideas that are typically depicted as *future*, *progress* and *universality*.

The concept of 'nature' runs throughout the Xenofeminist Manifesto, arguing it should be redefined and resignified as something inherently questionable (Hester, 2018). For Laboria Cuboniks, nature cannot be pre-cultural, for she considers that it has always been technified. As such, ascertaining the onto-historical conditions that created such nature would be necessary in order to set up such a field of 'action'. In her manifesto she says: "If nature is unjust, change nature!".

Another related and current line of cyberfeminist action, in its contemporary form, is the social activism that seeks to empower women by means of do-it-yourself technology. Here, we can find collective and anonymous projects that produce and develop tutorials on programming and hacking, low-tech robotics and tech workshops for the conscious manipulation and control of women's own bodies, outside of legislation, health systems and contemporary pharmacopoeia. These schemes have been analysed and promoted by technofeminist[16] associations and collectives in recent decades, often taking inspiration from the low-tech devices that women use in the domestic context, and also in the most private of settings. That would be the case of the amateur technology used for birth control,[17] seeking to break free from the patriarchal restrictions and laws that apply to women's bodies and lives, critiquing thus the

[16] Although the term 'technofeminist' is often used as a synonym of 'cyberfeminist', this is indicative of a change in focus over the last two decades – it started with all things 'cyber-' at the end of the last century, with its more speculative and open-ended logic, towards today's greater digital, material and technological precision.

[17] An example would be Del Em, a suction device to extract the uterine lining, with the help of a syringe and a flexible cannula. It was used in the seventies to avoid unwanted pregnancies, in places where abortion was illegal. It served both as birth control and to prevent menstruation from happening. See Helen Hester (2018).

biopolitical, sanitary and legislative power that has put them (and continues to put them) at risk, in places where they are denied abortion rights or where reproduction and pregnancy are turned into a lucrative business.

But if we were to pinpoint the most active focal points for cyberfeminist debate and activism today, we should look (and I do so admiringly) to what is happening in Latin America.[18] Of the multitude of linked projects, one of the most interesting initiatives can be found in Nicaragua, and it goes by the name of EnRedadas. For years it has been led by María Martha Escobar, and it is one of the most active examples of how the Internet is being engaged with and inhabited via cyberfeminist approaches. These initiatives, although they have no real reason to pledge allegiance to a particular word (i.e. 'cyberfeminist'), they stand by it, agreeing with its feminist motivations and practices. They approve of how technology can help better the daily lives of girls and women, in terms of cultural diversity, violence, inequality and the lack of reproductive rights, as well as racism and both work-based and social precariousness. From among their publications it is worth highlighting the 2018 mapping[19] of some of the collective initiatives related with cyberfeminism in Latin America, by Gema Manzanares.

In Spain, collectives such as Donestech[20] have set up some of the most recent and interesting cyberfeminist projects. This collective, made up of activists and cultural producers, came about in 2006

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[18] See '(ciberfeministaslatam) Investigación sobre identidad y agencia colectiva del movimiento ciberfeminista en América Latina': https://donestech.net/noticia/ciberfeministaslatam-investigacion-sobre-identidad-y-agencia-colectiva-del-movimiento [in Spanish].

[19] See Gema Manzanares, 'Mapeo de iniciativas ciberfeministas latinoamericanas', 2018: https://enredadas.org/2018/08/08/mapeo-de-iniciativas-ciberfeministas-latinoamericanas/ [in Spanish].

[20] Donestech, 2019: *<http://www.donestech.net>* See also: «Privacidad, seguridad digital y ciberfeminismos»: http://www.donestech.net/noticia/encuentro-donestech-4032017-privacidad-seguridad-digital-y-ciberfeminismos-experiencias [in Spanish].

in Catalonia, and their work is oriented towards researching and intervening in the field of gender/technology relations. They have produced books and documentaries about women tech *artists* and hackers, and they have developed training programmes to improve the digital privacy and safety of women and feminist collectives, such as the 'Kit Against Sexist Violence', research projects for institutions and workshops for digital self-defence and against cyber-bullying and online cyber-surveillance.

Education and social activism is an issue that has been explored again and again since the nineties, in all kinds of debates and workshops on the forms of feminism linked with programming and hacking. This issue shows an imaginary which goes beyond the kind of training programmes that might inspire young girls to say "I want to be an engineer". This aim is also linked to promoting hobbies such as gaming, tinkering with technology and geek culture.

In fact, for cyberfeminism it has not gone unnoticed that most techie 'geeks' are still young men who work in very specific places in the world, who have been able to turn their hobby into a job and who boast of the mythical tales of being lone geniuses, and passionate about sci-fi and technology. This tendency brings with it a masculinised domain, where jobs are related to contemporary forms of power in this age of the algorithm and technological production. There is also the economic emancipation itself of paid work, as well as prestige – all of which is lacking in the more precarious and feminised jobs where women struggle with symbolic payment, unpaid work and temporary contracts (that striking difference between 'hobbies that turn into well-paid jobs' and 'jobs that are trivialised as hobbies', precisely because they are feminised).

In this regard, activists such as Laurie Penny propose not only to incentivise young girls to experiment and play around with technology, but also to foster feminist alliances with the techie 'geek' boys who often claim to be marginalised during their adolescence (Penny, 2014). I think Penny's argument is interesting because it draws on a crucial issue in order to avoid feminism being understood as

mere 'women's stuff'. I refer to the kind of empathy that allows us to revisit whatever it is that makes certain people vulnerable, albeit via different forms of marginalisation or inequality. Building bridges and sharing experiences, with frankness, could create bonds out of empathy and solidarity. This would allow us to learn from others, to speak and listen, to pass ideas on, to share different kinds of knowledge and transform an inherently unfair structure.

This kind of empathy might be ground-breaking when trying to tackle one of the most serious problems faced by women in the technological imaginary. I am not referring to their forced invisibility, but rather to their *undervaluation*. Because though it is true that women are becoming increasingly visible faces in the tech world, this is only where their image (as PR or customer services managers) is used to make up for their blatant absence in posts of development, engineering, leadership and technological imagination. In other words, this gives the impression of systemic social change, but it is superficial. I think this undervaluation can be attributed to more profound forms of the maintaining and reproduction of power, in the processes of how women are educated and enculturated regarding technology. I think about those subtle forms that children hear from a young age, different kinds of advice and expectations, reminding us and reiterating what we can do. It goes far beyond just telling girls 'what they cannot do' - it might simply be a case of "draw a few flowers on it", "make it look nice and pretty", "work for free", "be beautiful and skinny", "the boy's coming!", "be careful online". In order to liberate ourselves from these models, there must be "structural, machinic and ideological correction" (Laboria Cuboniks, 2015) which is also imaginative. To take a deep breath, and to wonder: "Why does it have to be like this?"

When speaking about feminism, we cannot leave out those everyday routines and strategies that aid in the symbolic maintenance of a patriarchal imaginary. Nor can we forget that the territory of cyberfeminism is not and cannot exclusively be the Internet, but also

those territories where technology is thought up and acted on, those places where it is consumed and appropriated for life, where we construct ourselves subjectively and in terms of our identity, dressed up in technology. In this context, if the collectives and projects of social activism that today appropriate cyberfeminism stand out among contemporary feminist practice, it is because they promote training, resources, links and empathy among women and among all those people who feel committed to the idea of technology helping us to create a more equal world.

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A Cartography of the *Non-Place*[1]

Zara Rodríguez Prieto

> If you read this square magazine long enough, you will soon find a circularity that spreads into a map devoid of destinations, but with land masses of print (called criticism) and little oceans with right angles (called photographs). Its binding is an axis, and its covers paper hemispheres. [. . .] The axis splits into a chasm in your hands, thus you begin your travels by being immediately lost. [. . .]
>
> Where do these maps start?
>
> No place.
>
> Robert Smithson, *Hidden Trails in Art*, 1969

In 1966, Edward T. Hall coined the term 'proxemics' in order to develop an anthropological theory that would analyse how human beings use and live in space, in relation to other people in their immediate

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surroundings, and in relation to other social and cultural groups. Hall's study focused on the specific settings of everyday reality, such as the city, the home and the workplace, and to explain the spatial context where these human and social relationships are produced, he considered sensory and perceptual factors. Thus, he established a close link between *interpersonal distances* and *spatial distances*, whereby sensory perception makes a distinction between distance receptors (sight, sound, smell) and immediate receptors (skin and muscles) as tactile and thermal sensors. With these criteria in mind, Hall put forward four types of sphere: the intimate, the personal, the social and the public. Each one of them spanned a particular distance with regards to other people, and Hall defined how each space conditioned the corresponding bodily interaction, with different codes in force depending on the context. Between the spheres there is progressive spatial, physical and sensorial separation. In *intimate distance*, bodies touch each other and all the senses are activated; in *personal distance* (among friends and family) this sensory activity is reduced, but there is still affectivity and bodily proximity; in *social distance* there is more space between bodies, physical contact is reduced and is replaced by visual and vocal contact. Finally, in the interaction between strangers (*public distance*), there is no personal and affective connection, and there is little visual or verbal contact. All the senses that are activated in intimate distance, i.e. sight, smell, body heat, hair or body odour, all become lessened as the distance increases. At larger distances, the tone of voice, its intensity and non-verbal communication instead become gestures and bodily postures.

These distances show what is culturally acceptable in this interpersonal space. They reflect a set of behaviours associated with each particular distance, but they also determine which sensory factors are activated in a given experience or communicative encounter.

In the last two decades, our everyday world has been shaken up by the immediate connectivity of the Internet, which has brought about other ways of relating with people, and other ways of understanding space. Within this new logic of interaction, a series of elements

come into play, elements which have directly impacted Hall's rules of interrelation. One such element is the virtual space which blurs the boundaries between the intimate, the personal, the social and the public. Here, in this space, the different information relating to each sphere still applies, but it is all accessible and shared within one and the same context. Logically, this process, which shrinks geographical and cultural distances, has led to a rethinking of the concepts of the public and the private, since these concepts are no longer ascribed to concrete, physical spaces. This text will not delve further into the redefinition of intimacy and public identity, but rather it will observe how online interaction modifies our experience in relation to space.

In the field of Communication Studies, Stephen Duplantier (1992, p. 34) gave the name 'teleproxemics' to the process that he defined in the 1980s as "being from afar", the state of being both near and far away at the same time. Herbert Zettl, in his book *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics* (1973, p. 226) used the term *teleproxemics* as part of a clarification in response to Joshua Meyrowitz's own proposal of *para-proxemics* (1982, pp. 221-41), regarding personal interaction in the television age. Meyrowitz had referred to a study in which the real distance between several people from different cultures was compared with the relative closeness of their new hyperlinks, when using some kind of device or connection. This concept has not been studied in depth in the last few decades, and therefore this text seeks to investigate the teleproxemic process by looking at more recent artistic practices that have explored the possibilities of being simultaneously near and far away.

In 1994, Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby presented their project 'Fields and Thresholds' at the Doors of Perception Conference, organised by the Netherlands Design Institute and Mediamatic Amsterdam. The project sought to research how the virtual experience can lead to a transformation in the physical space. Their proposal looked beyond the mid-90s preoccupations with *reality* vs *virtual reality*, and they anticipated a relational mechanism based

on social networks which would, in the following decade, go on to cause a shift in the communication paradigm:

> For us, the communication aspects of telecomputing are less about finding ways of "inhabiting" abstract digital "space", and more about the exploration of new situations arising in physical space. We are interested in the link-up of "places" within a vast field of telecommunicative possibility. [. . .]
>
> We are looking to explore new forms of "difference" and possibilities for new aesthetic qualities. Telecommunications could provide a "window" or "filter" on the other places, connecting the place you are in to other places, replacing familiar local sound with strange sounds from elsewhere. (Dunne and Raby 1994, p. 61)

One of the central aspects of Dunne and Raby's project was the concept of thresholds as spaces generated by teleproxemics, based on the fact that the boundaries between physical space and telematic space are clearly defined by the electronic devices that allow their users to be either inside (switched on) or outside (switched off). Although virtual interfaces only exist as part of the device, they can offer varying degrees of complexity in communication. Dunne and Raby wanted to blur this boundary, and merge the physical and telematic space into one, creating an "in-between zone, a multi-sensory threshold [. . .] allowing us to bring some of the more subtly complexities of our social skills" (1994, p. 61). That is, their project presented various situations mediated by electronic devices in different places at the same time, to suggest the importance of an intermediary 'abstract' space where sensibilities can be transferred and exchanged. This space is built based on a simultaneity of different times, and a co-existence of multiple places, where time and space expand and contract at the same time. When a person in Australia interacts directly with someone in Europe and someone in America, they all get together at the same time, and yet it is a different time for each person. Using this same example, if we talk

about a spatial interaction, these three people, who are in physically distanced spaces, with distinct contextual and cultural implications, get together in one shared place. The idea that I shall explore here is that online interaction generates an intermediary space which I refer to as a *non-place*, i.e. a social space superimposed onto the city's space. The connections and interactions between both of these spaces are defined by teleproxemics, i.e. the condition of being close and far away at the same time, the possibility of omnipresence, and the phenomenon by which interpersonal distances and their identifying features in social behaviour – intimate, personal, social and public behaviour – are redefined in this shared space.

1. The *non-place* and the city

It is practically impossible to reflect on human relations without thinking about the city. The city is the place of social relations and experiences; it is where we construct our surroundings to live in, it is where we establish ourselves as subjects, as part of a social group and part of a space-time context. The city is "a space which is fashioned, shaped and invested by social activities during a finite historical period" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 73). But it is also the place where thought is activated, as well as debate, encounters and conflict – it is where human beings set themselves in motion. As Virilio states, "philosophy was born in the city. [. . .] Without the city, there can be no politics. [. . .] The city is the major political form in history" (Virilio, 1999, p. 40). The city is the collective creation of those who inhabit it.

Marc Augé studied, from an ethnographic perspective, certain spaces in the contemporary city where there is great convergence and movement of people, but where it is not possible to carry out an anthropological reading of the society because there is no clear correspondence between the spatial and the social. This impossibility is due to the continuous transit, which impedes any meaningful interrelation between people. Airports and shopping centres were,

for Augé, good examples of the *non-place*. Augé thought of a 'place' as that which can be defined as a relational and historical place of identity, and, therefore, if a space cannot be defined on these terms then it should be considered a *non-place*, or rather, a space which is not in itself a place of identity. Therefore, according to Augé, 'place' is anthropological because it includes "the possibility of the journeys made in it [and] the discourses uttered in it" (Augé, 1995, p. 81).

Augé follows on from De Certeau's differentiation between space and place in order to separate out his own concepts of place and *non-place*, although his work is not directly comparable with De Certeau's distinction between place (a geometric configuration) and space (determined by movement), since Augé's concept of place is understood in itself as a space that is activated by the very act of being inhabited. For De Certeau, a *place* is "the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place)" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 117). And *space*, on the other hand, is a dimension affected by movement and its potential for activating such space: "[It] is composed of intersections of mobile elements. [. . .] Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 117).

Space for De Certeau is, therefore, a *practiced place*, which takes into account three aspects:

a. Corporality and perception: the existential space as a place for bodily and perceptual experience, in relation to the world.
b. Space as a speech act: "in relation to place, space is like the word when it is spoken" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 117). In other words, as a frame for something that is happening, which 'takes place' according to bodies. This aspect corresponds, in this analysis, to the idea of a tour as a journey and an act of transformation.
c. The importance of the discourse which constantly "transforms places into spaces", as determined by the distinction between 'seeing' and 'going' (or 'doing', i.e. spatialising actions) (De Certeau,

1984, p. 119). This third idea is linked to the mutual interaction between the trajectory and the agent who carries it out, and their spatial practice with regards to the map and tours.

As such, the street, defined geometrically by urbanism, becomes a space due to the intervention of the walkers (De Certeau 1984, p. 117). The tour, in the city, is an intermediary space mobilised by the bodies that (re)signify the place and the urban space. But how can this concept of space be articulated with regards to a public sphere that is conditioned by teleproxemics and the telesphere (Duplantier, 1992), a sphere where life happens in parallel and intertwined with the physical surroundings of the city?

In this sense, the *non-place* as proposed in this article is a *practiced* place, a space somewhere between the physical city and the virtual city, generated by a connected technological device, where human interactions take place that transcend the two types of city. It is a multiple social space (different times and different spaces that merge into one), located between the abstract and the concrete, where the space of continuous transit is a state that is ready to be activated at any given present moment.

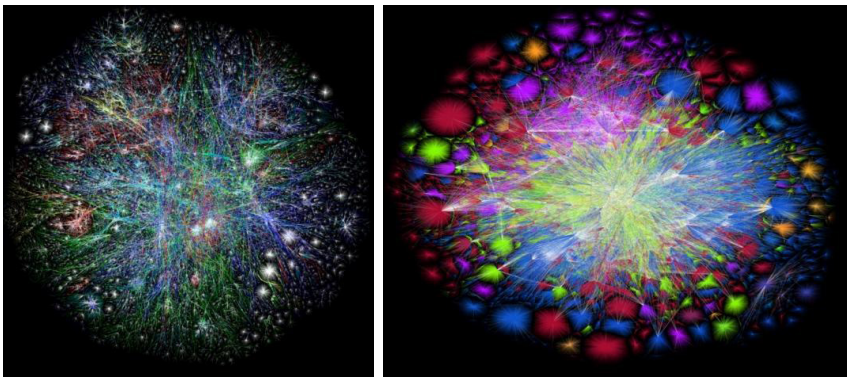
On the one hand, this concept of the *non-place* is a crowded, bustling place, like the one described by Augé, but furthermore it could be defined as 'anthropological' insomuch that it defines a social behaviour and a public sphere focused on the possibilities of the here and now. Significant relationships are produced in this sphere, based on telepresence, in which interaction is not confined to a virtual setting – as might be the case with a computer game – but rather there are implications on both sides of the screen. It is a space defined by the tours and discourses that it comprises, revolving around certain codes of specific language. It is, therefore, a "concrete and symbolic construction of space", as carried out by a social group (Augé, 1995, p. 51).

The abstract and unspecific *non-place* is a place of relational intersection between the physical city and the virtual city, which

Virilio describes as a "virtual hypercentre" and a "world meta-city" which exists thanks to the urbanisation of telecommunications. It is "a city that is everywhere and nowhere at the same time" (Virilio, 1997, p. 73 [own translation]), forming a new social and public sphere that is superimposed upon and intertwined with the social space of the physical city, resulting in changes on a global scale.

In the *non-place*, the space-time intervals that Hall described from a metric and sensorial perspective become interpersonal spaces, dispersed in a rhizomatic fractal dimension that cannot be defined in terms of real distances. The virtual city is constantly intertwined with the physical city, via the trajectories plotted out by interaction, and in this constant exchange the possibility arises of redefining the idea itself of space. The walker who, in De Certeau, transforms the space by means of their body in motion, is here somebody who simultaneously moves around and modifies the two spheres that they inhabit.

The representation of online life has constantly been mapped out, and the presence and speed of the Internet has increased progressively. One possible visualisation of this abstract space, full of interconnected paths, are the node maps that the artist Barrett Lyon has brought together in *The Opte Project*, since 2003. Via *traceroute*, a data collection system, lines are drawn from one connection point to another, a way of tracking, visually, the worldwide routes of interactions.



The Opte Project, Barrett Lyon. Left (2003), right (2015). MoMA, New York. https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/barrett-lyon-the-opte-project-mapping-the-internet-2003/

These images are the visualisation of a form of inhabiting based on the constellation of networks and continuous exchanges that have undergone changes according to the characteristics of the devices in question. In the *desktop* age, interaction meant that bodily movement was repressed in favour of a fixed connection in a specific place, but now, since the rise of portable devices, virtual trips often happen at the same time as users' physical displacements. Thus, the interaction itself is in motion, and constantly circulating. The practices of *locative art* that have looked into this immediate feedback between the physical and the virtual space, via the combination of movement and localisation, have been studied by Martín Prada (2015, pp. 226-235) as poetics of mobility.

2. Tours as transformation: the map. *Random Encounters*

The map, as with tours, is an elemental form of spatial organisation. It is a mental and symbolic representation of space, in which we locate ourselves in relation to our immediate and distant surroundings. De Certeau notes the close connections, in ancient times and until the Middle Ages, between tours and maps, and in fact the most crucial information on any map used to be the tours that were marked upon it. In this type of representation, the itineraries were drawn with straight lines that had a performative meaning, indicating which cities to go to, where to visit, where to spend the night, as well as the distances between places, travel times, etc., a cartographical concept that is closer to what we might understand today as a travel journal. The tour, understood as an itinerary of different actions upon this spatial representation, took precedence: "each of these maps is a memorandum prescribing actions" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 120). Following modern scientific discourse, the map slowly became autonomous, phasing out the images of the practices that made such a map possible, as well as the

representation of actions (for travel, for war, politics, business . . .). The map thus became a more straightforward plan where places were projected according to Euclidean descriptive geometry (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 120-21).

Therefore, paying particular attention to tour routes, both on the physical and virtual plane, would mean reviving an old, lost connection between space and action. Both cities, the urban and the virtual, are constituted and redefined by such tours. In the urban city, this is done by walking, and in the virtual city, by connecting and interacting.

In the actions analysed in this text, the map works as a nexus that forms the connection between both kinds of city, by means of trajectories and tours, thus constituting a visible part of the *non-place*.

In *Random Encounters* (2010), Michelle Teran works on the map of Essen (Germany), by selecting a series of YouTube videos based on their geolocated data, to relive some of the day-to-day stories that happened around the city. With this work she participated in *Hacking the City*,[2] a project that brought together different interventions in public and communicative spaces, organised that year at the Museum Folkwang in Essen. This piece belongs to a line of work that the artist started in 2009 with *Buscando al Sr. Goodbar* (Murcia) and *The City is Creative* (Eindhoven), followed later by *Ilica 1* (Croatia, 2011), *Folgen* (Berlin, 2011) and *Urban Takes Helsinki* (2012), although Teran's interest in city tours as a way to make connections was already present in previous works such as *Life: A User's Manual* (2003), a series of performances that explored walking in the city and the wireless networks that invade, invisibly, our surroundings. The performances also reflected on how these networks can interfere with the visible world around us. The preparatory work for *Random Encounters* consisted of selecting around 40 videos on different topics, apparently random ones: a family birthday party in Andalusia, several fire engines rushing out, a song played on the piano, a guitar solo, a litter of new-

[2] http://www.hacking-the-city.org (consulted 15/07/2020)

born puppies, a tarantula in the garden or a fragment of *Call of Duty*, among others. For the final piece, Teran selected five of these people to be visited by a small group. The video creators were asked to present something to this group (unlike in *Buscando al Sr. Goodbar*, where they were asked to recreate the same scene as in the video), such as a reading, a performance or a workshop, which could generate a collective learning experience. The visiting group were not previously informed about the place they were going to, nor whom they would be meeting there. Therefore, an unusual experience was created, like a chance meeting with a stranger.

The route taken in each of these actions, in which the artist is involved, starts with the recording of a scene by somebody (anybody), usually in their day-to-day surroundings (an observation of something that is going on before their eyes, a self-shot video showing some kind of skill, a family celebration, etc.). Next, the action continues with the personal decision to make it public, to share it on the Internet with an indeterminate and potentially huge audience. This is the moment when the boundaries between the intimate, the personal, the social and the public become blurred, and when it is possible to establish some kind of interaction with 'worlds' that are physically distant but accessible online. The tour comes to an end (or perhaps begins anew) when the artist turns this route around, when she selects a video and its maker, she gets in contact with them, she initiates a series of conversations in which she explains her work, they respond, they agree to meet up, a time and a place is set so that they can get together, where they can pool their thoughts and open themselves up to the possibility of transformation.

Although this is not a work based on telepresence, with simultaneous communication, it is in fact based on relations of coexistence by means of the video's different trips around the *non-place* while it is available online, travelling from point to point like a chain of exchanges.

Random Encounters, Michelle Teran, 2010. http://www.ubermatic.org

This tour, which flits between physical displacement and digital transference, is a *practiced* space (a non-place) which works as a place of enunciation. Following De Certeau's explanation about the equivalence between spatial practice and its discursive potential in terms of passing through a place, the trajectory of the action in Teran's work, from its beginnings until it concludes with the get-together, could be considered as an act of transformation that is conditioned by a process of the contraction and expansion of times and spaces. De Certeau further develops this equivalence by linking spatial practice with the act of speaking. He mentions two forms of rhetoric to develop his explanation: *synecdoche* (referring to the whole by the name of one of its parts, e.g. counting livestock by their heads) and *asyndeton* (the omission of conjunctions, e.g. *I came, I saw, I conquered*). The former replaces the whole with fragments, while the latter separates the whole by eliminating the conjunctive and the consecutive. Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the detail, and shrinks the whole. Asyndeton cuts out: it "undoes continuity and undercuts its plausibility" (De Certeau, 1984, p. 101). This description of walking would be applicable to the tour that integrates and blends together the physical and virtual spheres, in Teran's work. Each video is an augmented and fragmented reality at the same time: "a space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands. Through these swellings, shrinkings, and fragmentations, that is, through these rhetorical operations a spatial phrasing of an analogical (composed of juxtaposed citations) and elliptical (made of gaps, lapses, and allusions) type is created" (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 101-102). The tour, then, is a fragmented movement which expands and contracts, like the forms of rhetoric, and which – following the comparison between linguistic discourse and spatial displacement – generates a framework that has discursive and transformative capacity, that 'takes place' according to the bodies and intersubjective trails it leaves behind.

Virilio also establishes a link between spatial practice and its discursive potential, in the act of passing through a place. He considers the *trajectory* to be "the nature of proximity that unites human beings with each other and the city" (Virilio, 1999, pp. 39-40), and he considers it complementary to the relations between object and subject. Thus, he proposed the term *trajective* to join the 'subjective' and 'objective', with reference to this intermediate place that is inhabited by the distance and proximity between bodies, a *trajective space*, potentially full of meaning, with its own discursive and enunciative capacity. For Virilio: "I am thus a man of the trajective, and the city is the site of trajectories and trajectivity. It is the site of proximity between men, the site of organization of contact. Citizenship is the organization of trajectories between groups, between men" (Virilio, 1999, pp. 39-40). Described in these terms, his idea of the trajectory is associated with movement, but also with the factor of time, and it gives the temporal dimensions of past, present and future the lineal structure of the tour, as expressed in the start, the journey and the arrival. In these terms, the concept of the trajectory in Virilio is presented as an intermediary space in the relations between human agents and non-human agents with regards to the proximity of the surrounding space. This takes us back to Hall's theory of proxemics, which is based on the management of space, distance and proximity. The idea of the *trajectory* brings with it the factor of *displacement*.

3. Walking, sharing and conversing as practical use of space: *You Get Me*

Hall believed, as seen in his proxemic theory, that the cultural factor was decisive in the process of interpersonal encounters and communication, since there is something beyond the mere exchange of information - there is a whole sensitive and affective shared imaginary that frames this process of meeting and conversation.

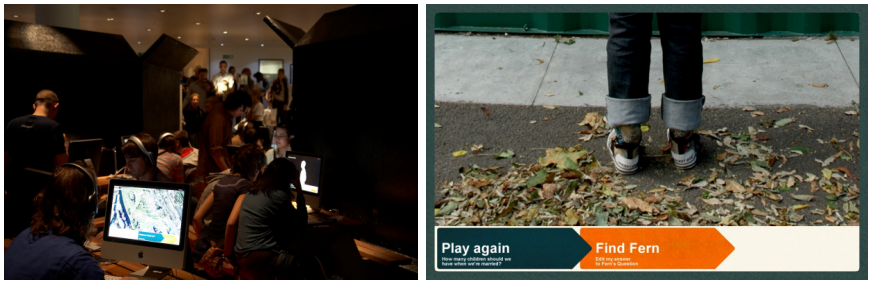
Today, virtual communication has not managed to become a truly cross-border system, but this is not because such a system is impossible – instead, there are various different interested parties who control and regulate the ability to transcend both territorial and virtual limits. This has a direct influence on access, and also on the kind of information that can be accessed. Nevertheless, the capacity for open and global connection has, in itself, the potential to let in different cultures, or at least generate a common space (a non-place) where they can come into play. Exploring this place was the intention of the collective Blast Theor*y* in *You Get Me* (2008). This piece, based on the strategy of an online interactive game, looks into interpersonal relationships and how they are conditioned by distance, place and the influence of mediation on conversation and mutual understanding. The game consisted of connecting two places in London that, although geographically not so far apart – just five miles – they are nevertheless separated by a huge cultural gulf. One of the spaces was Mile End Park, in the Tower Hamlets borough where there is a large concentration of people from ethnic and religious minority backgrounds, particularly Muslim and/or from Bangladesh. The other space, the Royal Opera House, is the traditional and majestic 18th-century royal theatre located in Covent Garden, a charming place, with an artistic atmosphere and great tourist appeal. Furthermore, it is in the borough of Westminster, home of the quintessential symbols of British power and the monarchy: the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace and Westminster Abbey.

The aim of the work was to explore whether the technology and digital devices that surround us really can build bridges, or whether they have the opposite effect of reinforcing the existing social divisions. For this piece, a group of eight players were selected, and they had to traverse the physical space of Mile End Park (they were the 'street players') while a group of visitors in the Royal Opera House spoke with them via a virtual map (the 'online players').

The eight street players, from different ethnic backgrounds and cultures, were selected in summer 2008 through various workshops held at Urban Adventure Base, a public support centre for young disabled people and, under the guidance of Caitlin Newton Broad, the artistic co-director of Shopfront Contemporary Arts, a multidisciplinary artistic space for children and young people. Three members of Blast Theory worked with them to plot out their own personal geographies, exploring different places in the city and important moments in their lives so that they could be later reflected on a map. One of the participants (Rita) chose a swimming pool where she had almost drowned, while another (Hussain) linked his current house with important places in Bangladesh. These maps were the visualisation of critical issues in their lives, and this biographical component was gradually pieced together over the course of the project.

The online players took part from the connected terminals situated in the Royal Opera House, where they would choose one of the eight people in Mile End Park, and they would initiate a conversation with them. The homepage greeted them as follows: "Welcome to You Get Me. This is a game where you decide how far to go. At this moment a group of teenagers are in Mile End Park. Each one has a question they want you to answer. Pick a person and their question. Choose carefully because you only get one shot at this. And the others you didn't choose will then try their best to knock you out. Here they come . . .".

The visitors would choose one of the young people, with photos for reference, and then a question that would steer the conversation. Firstly, the online player would hear a story about each person, followed by the question. Jack, for example, described himself while jumping the barriers towards Southend, then urinating into a cup at the back of a bus whilst asking: "Would you employ me?". Rachel asked: "What is your line between flirting and cheating?", Hussain wondered "Why don't families let their older kids move out?", and Jade wanted to know "Why do I feel so close to you, if I don't even know you?"



You Get Me, Blast Theory, 2008. https://www.blasttheory.co.uk

In the first stage, the aim was to listen to the personal geography of the runner (the street player) via walkie-talkie. The more details that the runner revealed, the deeper their questions became, and it would all begin to make sense. At this moment, the online players would think of and write down an answer to their questions. If that answer didn't convince the runner, they would reject it and reveal more details about their life, and then they would accept a new answer. If the runner liked the answer, they would invite the other participant to the private chat, which included voice calls, and the online players could still write messages to them. Whilst navigating with the avatar around virtual Mile End Park, the idea was to avoid the other runners, because if they came too close it was game over.

This piece generated brief moments of conversation between strangers, in which the two people involved would share details, anecdotes and particular aspects of their life, thus producing tiny spaces of shared intimacy. All of the questions referred to personal aspects that reflected an existential concern in each participant's present situation. Each one of them highlighted the most important issue in their current lives, via a one-to-one exchange, and they hoped to get a different perspective which might somehow help transform their cause for concern. Hussain, worried about how he could move out of the family home, asked how the online player had achieved it, if it got easier over time, if all families are as uncomprehending as his, etc. The personal questions regarding work, love, heartbreak and families alluded to common situations

in everybody's lives, which made it easier for the online player to make an emotional connection with the others. The contextual and cultural conditioning of each player seemed less relevant than the act of sharing a moment of emotional closeness.

The whole piece took place walking around the urban surroundings of Mile End Park, while at the same time that space was visualised on a virtual map, and the conversation served as the thread to bind both spaces. The storytelling that arises from this correlation of spaces and movements transforms the space into a practiced space, including the separation that De Certeau referred to in terms of 'seeing' (the map) and 'going' (the tour).

You Get Me, Blast Theory, 2008. https://www.blasttheory.co.uk

This distinction that De Certeau makes, between 'map' and 'tour', is based on a 1975 study by Linde and Labov (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 118-19) about the spatial surroundings in relation to language and thought. In this work, they defined both concepts according to how they were described in a given situation. Thus, the map corresponded to a purely spatial descriptive model ('the bedroom is next to the kitchen'), whereas the 'tour' is connected with a descriptive model in

which the subject is implicit in the spatial practice ('turn right and you'll get to the living room'). The tour is an act of enunciation, a performative act which is intervened not only by a series of paths, but also a subject who activates these spatial units. As De Certeau (1984, pp. 119-20) notes, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else, creating discontinuity and interpreting the spatial elements that are at the same time discursive, in the way they denote actions: a wall sets a *limit*, a door opens a *possibility*, a one-way street imposes an *obligation*, etc. The discursive character of these terms implies a level of interpretation which is similar to the one carried out by the 'walker' who lives this kind of action on a virtual map.

When the conversation ends, the runner takes a photo which is sent to the visitor when they leave the Royal Opera House. The final phrase draws the game to a close: "This is Fern. It's 3.45 in the afternoon on Friday 12th September. I'm near the canal with the Pallant Estate behind me and I'm taking a photo for you. *You get me*."

4. The *non-place* modifies our mental map: *Awkward_NYC/Awkward Everywhere*

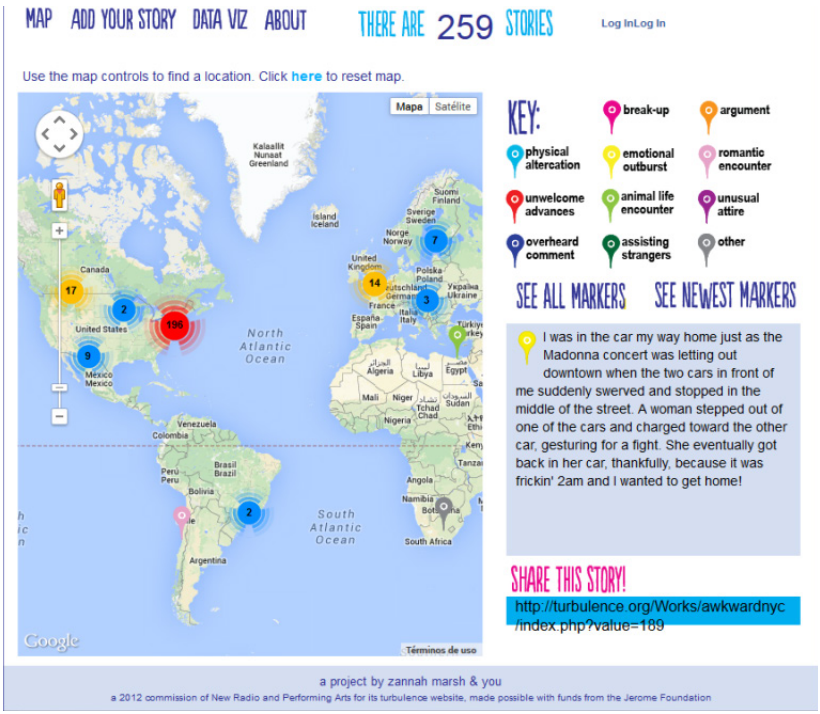
The shrinking of spatial distances, caused by the increased speed in transport and telecommunications, modifies how our body relates with the world, in terms of the physical plane and also the mental, sensory and perceptual plane. As Virilio states: "the world is more inside of us than it is outside of us. But if it really is outside, in geography and in the world-space, it also exists through my awareness of the world. This awareness of the world, which comes to me, as someone animated, is my movement and the nature of my movement" (Virilio, 1997, pp. 44-45 [own translation]). Our mental map contracts when there is a greater chance of interacting with both distant and close spaces at the same time, and our symbolic configuration of the city is also thus altered.

It is difficult to imagine the city without considering its virtual equivalent as a complementary space. We inhabit the meta-city of omnipresence, where places are severed from their cultural, historical and geographical meaning to then be reincorporated into another environment made up of networks of data and collages of images. This new spatial logic, which Castells called the *space of flows*, responds to a new kind of organisation of shared experience that is based not so much on a form but rather on a new process of knowledge (Castells, 2004).

Awkward_NYC/Awkward Everywhere (2012) by Zannah Marsh is a *non-place* that works as a spontaneous refuge for whoever might choose to share a moment of conflict by talking about it, albeit to an unknown audience. *Awkward_NYC* is an online collaborative map where anybody can post about the social incidents and minor interpersonal dramas that happen unexpectedly in public spaces. The map shows places in the metropolitan area of New York, but also anywhere in the world where there are misunderstandings, arguments or altercations. These incidents are anecdotal events, but they can also be disturbing – they are small personal dramas, typical of the human experience, that would otherwise not be made public, but that may well linger in the memory for a long time. Furthermore, they are associated with the particular place where they happened, thus forming part of the urban landscape. When they are published on a collective map, an emotional collective story is pieced together, based on mini-narratives.

Users could join in on the website or on Twitter, using the hashtag *#awkwardNYC*. They would choose a spot on the map and a category for their experience, colour-coded depending on the situation: physical altercation, unwelcome advances, overheard comment, break-up, emotional outburst, animal life encounter, assisting strangers, argument, romantic encounter, unusual attire, other. The description of the event had to be brief – under 500 characters – and the contribution was anonymous. Any person with an Internet connection could add a story to the map, and as more

and more stories appeared, an emotional representation began to take shape upon the terrain of the different cities. In total there were 259 stories, pertaining to any and all of the aforementioned categories.


MAP
ADD YOUR STORY
DATA VIZ
ABOUT
THERE ARE 259 STORIES
Log InLog In
Use the map controls to find a location. Click here to reset map.
Mapa
Satélite
KEY:
break-up
argument
physical altercation
emotional outburst
romantic encounter
unwelcome advances
animal life encounter
unusual attire
overheard comment
assisting strangers
other
SEE ALL MARKERS
SEE NEWEST MARKERS
I was in the car my way home just as the Madonna concert was letting out downtown when the two cars in front of me suddenly swerved and stopped in the middle of the street. A woman stepped out of one of the cars and charged toward the other car, gesturing for a fight. She eventually got back in her car, thankfully, because it was frickin' 2am and I wanted to get home!
SHARE THIS STORY!
http://turbulence.org/Works/awkwardnyc/index.php?value=189
North Atlantic Ocean
South Atlantic Ocean
Canada
United States
Mexico
Venezuela
Colombia
Brasil
Peru
Bolivia
Argentina
Angola
Namibia
South Africa
Google
Términos de uso
a project by zannah marsh & you
a 2012 commission of New Radio and Performing Arts for its turbulence website, made possible with funds from the Jerome Foundation

Screenshot: http://zannahbot.com

The resulting piece is an emotional topography of the city. It subverts the notion of cartography as something fixed and objective, thus giving voice to the minor goings-on that happen apparently anonymously in the daily flow of urban life. What leads to somebody deciding to use that hashtag to tell of an occurrence in the urban space? In this piece there is no immediate conversation with an interlocutor who nods along, listens and agrees in the same moment. Instead, it is a pronouncement launched into a kind of infinity, a message written without knowing whether it will even be read, listened to or altered somehow. They are personal stories, somewhat

similar to the narratives from the homemade videos in Teran's *Random Encounters*. They act like a kind of scream or whisper into the void, into a non-place where they might be received and perhaps transformed. They are like messages in a bottle, drifting to the other side of the map, insomuch they are stories that suggest other ways of sharing and talking – they show the need to share ourselves, to reveal ourselves, together, even if they do imply, on the other hand, a certain state of collective loneliness and a disconnect from the immediate surroundings. As Hector Bourges comments, regarding the play *Deus Ex Machina* (Teatro Ojo) in *The Infinite Conversation*:

> [The aim was] to interrupt everyday life with a phone call, interrupt the 'normality' of someone, somewhere in the country, getting hold of them over the air to suggest the possibility of a conversation. [. . .] Speaking and listening to a stranger, and thus imagining forms of narrating life here and there. [. . .] The 'machine' kept launching fragments of answers at us, fragments that are hard to complete. When saying again and again what can never be said, glimmers of light would appear, or 'signs of life', which gave a sense of how we lead our lives. How can we sustain ourselves, in life? How can we give it meaning?

This city is constantly imaginary, somewhere between the physical dimension and the ethereal character of the virtual. The place of the *non-place* is perhaps that city imagined by Brea, as a "purely fractal constellation of the affects, of the power of action; the pure negotiated transitivity of the respective movements, a relational space that is in process, a mere public sphere, a space for silent dialogue that is deployed by dissemination" (Brea 2010, pp. 109-110).

5. Conclusions

Every story is a travel story - a spatial practice.
(De Certeau)

As we have seen, the online experience proposes a new way of understanding 'space' which transcends the fixed and stable dimension of the physical surroundings by suggesting a sphere that is a hybrid of the material and the intangible. With this as a starting point, the present article has revolved around three concepts that refer to this new relationship between the inhabitant and their environment, using the case studies of three artistic proposals that have specifically focused on this contextual conflict. These concepts are teleproxemics, the *non-place*, and the tour as transformation.

Teleproxemics has been proposed here as an approximation and updating of E.T. Hall's theory on proxemics, which, in the 1970s, analysed from an anthropological perspective how people make use of space and its meaning, in different social and cultural contexts. My interest in reworking his theory responds to a new communicative, operative and relational paradigm that has since been generated by online telecommunication systems. The categories that previously referred to how exposed a given subject is, with regards to themselves and others (i.e. distinguishing between the intimate, the personal, the social and the public) no longer have a strict correspondence with physical distance. Nor is there a sequential correspondence anymore, of the type "the closer they get to my body, the more intimate the situation", or "the further away they get, the more public", because this ethereal sphere, which I have called a *non-place*, merges spaces and times, it compresses distances and redefines a whole system of interpersonal and inter-spatial relations. The three works discussed here all inherently imply this idea of blurring the boundaries between the public and the private, since the Internet has become a map of intimate and personal geographies, made public. The homemade

videos in *Random Encounters*, the emotional anecdotes in *Awkward_ NYC* and the conversations based on autobiographical notes in *You Get Me* directly allude to this new kind of narrative. In this sense, teleproxemics suggests that omnipresence is the possibility to be both close and far away at the same time. This is based on the body itself, but also on the emotional traces left behind by the body in the form of photos, words and discourse.

To further develop the concept of the *non-place*, I have borrowed Marc Augé's concept of the *non-place* as a starting point, to bring it into a different contemporary reality that is shot through with the mayhem of hyper-communication. Augé's *non-place*s are defined by absence, that is, the fact that they are not a place where identity applies. The *non-place* that I propose here, meanwhile, retains his idea of the space that one passes through, but not as a suspended space, but rather as a practiced space whose tours are trajectories with a discursive capacity, and that passing through them is what turns them into a common place that might undergo convergence, divergence and transformation. This new *non-place* is based on what Martín Prada (2015, p. 235) suggests might be a new spatial model that hinges on more sensitive spaces that reactivate the constant mutual transformation between the surroundings and the inhabitant. Here is where the idea of the tour as transformation appears, referring back to the enunciative equivalence between spatial practice and linguistic practice as noted by De Certeau, and the idea of the *trajective* (Virilio) as a space for possibility. This is where the use of the map as a symbolic representation of space begins to make sense - in the three works analysed here it is an intermediary place between the different people involved in the action. The map, in these pieces, acts like a graphical representation of the non-place, a space between the different interconnected physical places that includes both the tours around the urban environment and the flows that run through the virtual sphere. A dynamic cartography is therefore created, which is open to other possibilities for social and spatial interaction, where the two different spheres converge by

means of trajectories that are not just linear, but that also spread out like a rhizome.

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Ecotones of Connectivity

Artistic proposals in the development of the physical/digital ecotone

Kepa Landa

> All real borders are hazy.
> All invented borders are clearly defined.
> J. Wagensberg

An ecotone is a porous border. A physical/digital ecotone is a porous border intertwined with interfaces.

In a previous text of mine, 'Vértigos en Internet: síntomas y reacciones' (Landa, 1999), I pondered the question: could the Internet be defined as an ecotone? And I put forward a line of argument that supported this intuition. I also proposed this idea, briefly, as the conclusion to the foreword of the book *Futuros emergentes* (Molina & Landa, 2000). Two decades have since passed, and the evolution in our culture and technology backs up this idea even more clearly now, and so it appears to be a good time to revisit it, in depth, taking into account the developments of the last few years. In this article I will argue that, between the physical and digital space, there is also an ecotone situation, of different types. I will identify, with examples, contexts in which ecotonal traits can be observed, and

how this perspective helps us understand the relations between the physical and digital world.

In ecology, an ecotone (derived from the Greek *eco-* [*oikos* = house] and *tono* [*tonos* = tension]) refers to an intermediate space, one of transition, between two ecosystems, and it causes different species to converge (Odum, 1971). The concept had already been described by Frederic Clements as the area of tension between two communities, where the processes of exchange and competition between neighbouring life forms can easily be observed (Clements, 1905). These transitional spaces give rise to a great wealth of relations between species. These spaces normally have greater ecological diversity than any neighbouring ecosystems, and there are even some species that specifically inhabit this kind of space. These phenomena are known as 'edge effects'. Some examples we could highlight are the forest/meadow, the jungle/savannah, the wetlands/meadows, the taiga/boreal forest, the oasis/desert, the city/natural ecosystems, etc. The typical behaviour patterns of the animals who make use of these territories are: to take refuge in one ecosystem, but to feed on the border; to use the transition zone to communicate and seek a mate, but to raise their offspring in a different ecosystem – essentially, the idea is to cherry-pick from each of the nearby ecosystems.

The optimal combination of ecotones and the size of neighbouring ecosystems provides favourable conditions for the diversity of species (unlike excessively homogenous spaces, or areas that are too small for the growth of animal populations). The 'connectivity' in an ecotone refers to the extent to which the environment limits or permits the movement between areas of land or territories with distinct resources. Boosting the connectivity between different areas or territories is favourable for the conservation of species. According to Professor Juan C. Benavides, connectivity and scale are key factors in conservation (Benavides, 2019). An ecosystem is a system made up of a community of living organisms (biocenosis) and the medium or territory where they interact (biotope).

Since the late 20th century, and with increasing intensity over the first two decades of this century, we have been living between two distinct environments, one physical and the other digital, but with multiple connections between them. Each environment has its own inhabitants and its own medium, with their particular rules and characteristics. We could consider them as two ecosystems – a physical, real ecosystem on the one hand, and a digital ecosystem on the other, and we freely move between them with ease, via different interfaces and processes of connectivity. This close relationship means we can identify this environment as an ecotone. The physical/digital ecotone has grown by means of interfaces that facilitate connectivity and that link humans with a wide range of digital processes, but more experimental incursions have also played a vital role in its growth.

The territory of the digital ecosystem includes a whole range of elements, from the servers that provide us with access to websites to the personal storage systems in 'the cloud', from the Internet of things with specialised and distributed computational mechanisms to surveillance systems, from personal mobile devices to the Big Data analysis systems of large corporations and governments, from personal wi-fi networks all the way up to global positioning systems. This is a broad and increasingly complex territory.

As with all ecosystems, it has a set of inhabitants: in this case, they go from hybrid inhabitants, like avatars, to the purely digital ones such as the A.I. algorithms or intelligent agents who circulate the Internet while programmed to gather information. The hybrid inhabitants take on many forms, from avatars in virtual reality systems such as Second Life to online videogames, but there are also ephemeral forms, live and direct, such as the examples of telepresence or those which carry out a physical action in a remote setting, via robots or other physical devices, or the forms used in videoconferences.

In the physical/digital ecotone, there are certain typical behaviours (though, in the future, this list of possibilities might

well expand): communicating, storing and accessing information, acquiring resources for one's survival, finding a partner or shielding oneself in anonymity, seeing without being seen, or making oneself heard without being seen. All of these coincide with animal behaviour, apart from storing and accessing information, which has been an exclusively human activity ever since the invention of writing.

We often speak of 'navigating' or 'surfing' the Internet, which reinforces the idea of fluidity, but at times the Internet is more like a dense forest, where we can only see a tiny part of it, or else it is like an open meadow, where we can see far into the distance.

The distribution of animals in an ecotone is fundamentally linked to the climate conditions and the resources available for them to feed, protect themselves and reproduce. These factors depend on the configuration of the terrain, the presence of water, the type of vegetation on offer there. The survival and spread of the plant life, in turn, depends on the climate, the presence of water and the soil composition.

Naiman, Décamps and Fournier (1989) noted that the ecotones of inland waters are often characterised by their having greater biological diversity than in adjacent territories. Thus, the frequency of ecotones throughout the territory directly affects biodiversity in a predictable way. Just like in a natural ecotone, where a higher degree of biological diversity depends, to a large extent, on the possibility of moving from one ecosystem to the next, in the physical/digital ecotone another key factor might be this ability to move between these two contexts by means of interfaces. In order to access the digital ecosystem, we need interfaces, and therefore the greater diversity in the interfaces that can open up the border for us, the easier it will be to access the digital environment and all its activity in said ecosystem. To further elaborate upon the similarities between the natural ecotones and the physical/digital ones, we could also consider that the more physical/digital ecotones there are, then the greater the diversity in their inhabitants.

1. Contributions and reflections by artists

Engineers lay the foundations for new access routes, but it is often artists who try to lay new paths, straying from the well-trodden ones. They act like explorers who research, reflect, interrogate and inform about what is possible on the other side, broadening out the possibilities for growth, or trying to design new ways to navigate or give meaning to the circulation between both ecosystems. Depending on the different forms of access, different ecotones can be configured.

I will now address a series of proposals that work around the poetics of connectivity in environments that are sub-systems within the physical/digital ecotone: telepresence, augmented reality, geolocation and the infodermis.

2. Telepresence

It seems like an opportune moment to discuss works that engage with telepresence - given the Covid-19 pandemic, we are being forced to rethink how to express our relationships and interactions. Some of these works might inspire new artists, architects or engineers to develop proposals that allow us to live together in a more fluid way, in this so-called 'new normal'.

Personal videoconference systems have existed since the expansion of the Internet, most notably in the late 90s, but they did not become common until the widespread installation of broadband (ISDN, ADSL or fibreoptic). However, videoconferencing has since acquired considerable importance and uptake in society, given the Covid-19 lockdowns. The greater access to this technology has opened doors for it to be used in new ways, but it is worth remembering some of the pioneers in this field, both in theoretical and artistic terms.

Marvin Minsky, co-founder of the MIT's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, coined the term 'telepresence' in an article in the

magazine *Omni*, and he used it to designate remote manipulation (Minsky, 1980). To get across the idea of remotely controlled tools, scientists had been using words like 'teleoperator' or 'telefactor'. Minsky proposed thus 'telepresence', as suggested by his friend, the researcher Patrick Gunkel. Telepresence stresses the importance of high-quality sensorial feedback.

Another author, Roy Ascott, suggested that the condition of 'telepresence' is that of being "both here and there [. . .] whether mediated by computer networks, interactive video, slow-scan television, fax, digital image transfer, videotex, teleconference, videophone or online communications by means of telephone, cable or satellite link" (1991, p. 116). Today, of course, more elements can be added to this list, such as webcams, chatrooms, online videogames or telerobots.

Meanwhile, for Eduardo Kac, who was involved in the creation of projects in this field, telepresence combines telecommunication and remote or 'telerobotic' action. To be telepresent somewhere else, it must be possible to physically manipulate and affect that environment remotely, not just see or hear it (Kac, 1996).

Philippe Queau suggests that telepresence, augmented reality or tele-virtuality are examples of different degrees of presence, which generate different forms of mixing virtual and real presence (Queau, 1997). And this is perhaps one of the key concepts for understanding the debate around the term 'telepresence', i.e. the 'degree' of presence.

Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz were pioneers in this field, developing several projects from the late 1970s onwards. *Hole in Space* (1980) is their most well-known project, and it connected the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in New York with a shopping centre in Century City, Los Angeles. In this intervention, they set up videoconference communication, over the course of three sessions, through shop windows in the street. People from both cities could see each other, on a 1:1 scale, and communicate directly. There was no explanation given, or any informative signage. The experiment was a sensation, and in subsequent sessions the media reported on

it. The final session included visits from friends and family who had arranged to meet there by telephone, to see each other in the respective shop windows, some 4000 km apart. This was the first experience in which the general public could access an unrestricted videoconference system in a public space. The participants were greatly impacted by it. This project received special help from NASA, who allowed them to use one of their telecommunication satellites (Galloway & Rabinowitz, 2000).

Satellite Arts (1977) was a previous piece, in which two groups of dancers (Mobilus), one in California and one in Maryland, give a performance using a split-screen setup, which then turns into one shared screen, in which the images are mixed into one single setting. The performance takes place live, and the dancers must coordinate with each other for the dance with their faraway peers to make sense, despite the lag caused by the satellite transmission. In these situations, the effect that the artists call 'image as a place' arises (Paulsen, 2017). On this occasion, telepresence occurs in the interface, instead of via the screen.

Furthermore, Paulsen suggests that, in this piece, the combination of the two video feeds mixed into one form combines, synaesthetically, the senses of vision and touch, and that *Satellite Arts* rejects the binary structure of physical existence, i.e. here/there, now/then, the self/the other, real/virtual, and it offers a new version of the chiasm concept (a 'chiasmic screen'), in the sense attributed to the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

Chiasmic physiology is the point in which two anatomical structures cross over, e.g. two nerves or tendons. Chiasmic rhetoric refers to structures organised in the form A-B/B'-A'. "The chiasm in Merleau-Ponty's sense is a structure of mediation characterized by the reversal and circularity of the chiasmus ("there is a body of the mind and a mind of the body and a chiasm [*chiasme*] between them"; 1968, p. 259) as well as the unity-in-difference of the chiasm ("like the chiasm [*chiasma*] of the eyes, this one is also what makes us belong to the same world"; 1968, p. 215)" (see Toadvine 2011, p. 339).

These might be considered the first pre-digital experiences of inhabiting an ecotone based on telecommunication.

Touch, as a metaphor, has long been used in telecommunications. *Telematic Dreaming* (1992), by Paul Sermon, and the series of subsequent works in which he also used videoconferencing systems to bring people together in one and the same space, represent the development of the idea of telepresence, now realised digitally. Among Sermon's pieces, we can highlight the one in which he tried to ensure that the users experienced themselves but outside of their own space, combined with the intense tactile sensation coming from the bed/projection screen, in which a distant user reacts (Sermon, 1992). The artist said that he wanted to extend the sense of touch, and according to some of the users, they had a synaesthetic sensation, which mixed touch and sight, and the participants felt greatly immersed in the piece (Grau, 2004). Sermon explores this possibility in a range of different formats: *Telematic Dreaming*, in which two people share a projection in one bed; *Telematic Vision* (1993), which used a sofa to show the combined images; *The Tables Turned* (1993) used a central table and various chairs in each setting, to bring together the participants in one sole image. In the version presented in Madrid, it was simultaneously linked with Barcelona and Karlsruhe, and all the participants could be seen sitting at the same table. Sermon also created, in collaboration with other artists, a theatre play called *Unheimlich* (2005), which connected audiences and actors in Salford, UK, and Rhode Island, USA (see Sermon, 2020).

Regarding the earlier works in this series, Sermon reflects on how the disappearance of technology leads to the emergence of a new form of communication (Sermon, 2020). Connectivity has allowed for the appearance of this intermediate space, a space of exchange, which is a key point in terms of the differing 'degrees' that Queau alluded to.

Among the projects developed by Sermon, it is also worth highlighting *Teleporter Zone*, a work created to help entertain children who are hospitalised for prolonged periods of time. Using *chroma key* ('green screen') technology, he takes live images of these

children and blends them into imaginary scenarios (an aeroplane, a pirate ship, a spaceship, a circus, etc.).

It is worth remembering how research into artistic projects, when channelled into medicine-related project design, can bring about very interesting solutions, as was the case of David Rokeby and his project *Very Nervous System* as applied to therapy for Parkinson's Disease (Rockeby, 1998), or Rolf Gehlhaar and his *Sound=Space* piece being used to stimulate children with autism or motor difficulties (Gehlhaar, 2014).

David Rockeby's project *International Feel* (2011) proposes a telepresential meeting by means of sound and positioning in two distant places (two identical places of 2.8 x 2.8 metres, one in Inter/Access, Toronto, and the other in V2, Rotterdam). According to whether there are two people dancing together in time, in both spaces, the sound generated will be harmonic or chaotic. Rockeby (2011) notes: "My favourite experience of this work would happen when I was moving alone for a while in the space, coming to identify with the sound my body was making in the installation. If someone in the remote space started moving at this point, I felt the sound of my body transform, and had a haunting sense that someone had just walked through my body." In this installation, sound was directional, and the relative positioning in each space was represented by the location of the sound, allowing both participants to find each other in that space. "My primary goal was to recreate this experience of having someone walk through you" (Rockeby, 2011). It is worth reflecting on the notion that, in such installations of telepresence, vision tends to heighten the sense of distance, while sound is immediate and intimate (Rockeby, 2011). In this case, we could highlight a perception of the ecotone that is somewhat rarer in humans, though not uncommon in animals: that of orienting ourselves by means of sound, and affording it the same veracity that we usually give to vision, just like bats do.

Varvaja Gulajeva and Mar Canet created the project *Binoculars to. . . Bincoulars from. . .* (2013) for Connecting Cities, an event that

connected Liverpool (FACT), Madrid (MediaLab Prado), Berlin (CHB), Melbourne (Fedsquare), Dessau (Bauhaus), Riga (Riga2014), Helsinki (m-cult, MediaFacade Festival), Linz (Ars Electronica) and Brussels (iMal, White Night) (see link in bibliography). This event has sought to bring together, in its different editions, institutions that have façades with screens, to develop artistic projects for the public space, using this medium.

In the case of Gulajeva and Canet, they propose a device that connects the different participating cities. The idea is to emulate those static binocular posts intended for tourists, posts which are often found in places with striking views, allowing visitors to see the detail of a distant landscape. In this work, the binoculars show a live feed of one of the other cities taking part in the event, but, furthermore, in that city the observer's eye is projected. This makes the onlooker present in a faraway place, revealing the act of observation, like an act of surveillance or voyeurism. Also, the eye has a starring role, and its being made visible might thus influence what is being observed. This piece serves to raise awareness about the huge number of CCTV cameras being installed in European cities, as well as in China and the United States, in a 'one-way ecotone'.

3. Augmented Reality

Augmented Reality refers to a collection of technologies that allow a live image (acting as a 'trigger') to be linked and superimposed with, in real time, another pre-set image, sound or video, so that both appear simultaneously on our digital device. When the device's camera detects a trigger, the augmented reality app deploys a layer of virtual information, combining the two, and we can then see them together on our phone screens, or hear the associated sound.

In these cases, a connection is made with remote digital information. The connectivity itself does not require the user to

type any URLs, nor click on any website links, in order to access the audiovisual files. Of course, there is a server address, where the document is stored, but accessing it is a far more subtle procedure. As such, the browser almost disappears, and our relationship with connection changes since it becomes far more fluid. More fluidity in connections can bring about new forms of interaction.

As a precedent in the artistic context, we might consider the Australian artist Jeffrey Shaw, one of the pioneers in the development of new ways of approaching virtual environments, as in projects such as *The Legible City* (1989) and subsequently *The Distributed Legible City* (1998).

Shaw's project cannot be regarded as Augmented Reality in the strictest sense, but rather, a landmark in Extended Reality (which combines aspects of Virtual Reality and Augmented Reality, with the direct perception of physical objects).

In this project, Shaw created an interactive installation which allowed the user to physically pedal on a static bicycle, whilst advancing through a virtual city where the buildings have been replaced by 3D text. He made three versions of this project, located in Manhattan (1989), Amsterdam (1990) and Karlsruhe (1991). Shaw himself identified one of its most interesting contributions: "Travelling through these cities of words is consequently a journey of reading; choosing the path one takes creates a recombination of these texts, and spontaneous conjunctions of meaning" (Shaw 1989, p. 1). In the second, distributed version, from 1998, the piece is based on the connection of distant users who share the same virtual space, and therefore, as well as the act of reading, there is interaction among the three cyclists.

The device created by Shaw changes the perspective of reading, which turns into a semi-immersive and dynamic experience with a physical effort needed to be able to travel around the text. The interface he developed, the static bicycle, changes the relationship with the virtual space and text, allowing the user to make reading decisions in a new way.

Years later, in 2018, Shaw himself created, in collaboration with Sarah Kenderdine, a work of augmented reality based on Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* (Shaw, 2018). In this case, the characters we come across in our journey around the piece are virtual, elderly male and female characters, who are seen to be carrying out certain repeated actions, with no clear end, just like Sisyphus. Pieces of marble act as triggers in this case, and they work like windows which allow us to access a bridge that connects us with a virtual environment that lives, necessarily, via its connection with the physical environment.

Julian Oliver, in his project *The Artvertiser* (2008), proposes replacing the content of billboards with artwork. As such, he develops a programme and a device which allows the artworks of his collaborators to be seen in the same place as previously-registered billboards. To see them, the spectator uses a device similar to binoculars, but with a camera. In this project, the artist talks of 'improved reality' more than 'augmented reality', because it is a reaction to advertising's invasion of the public space. He proposes that the substitution be immediately shared on social media (Oliver, 2008). The augmented reality ecotone invites us to see the world via an alternative reality superimposed onto an imposed reality, i.e. the reality of advertising.

Claire Bardainne and Adrien Mondot (who work under the name Claire B. & Adrien M.) have created works for exhibitions, such as *Mirages & Miracles*, in which digital animations are combined with the physical part of their work, with elements like stones or paper (Bardainne & Mondot, 2016). In these cases, the subtlety of the images which, for example, simulate a fine rain filling a painted puddle, or the characters moving between the stones of the sculptures, causes a deep sensation of familiarity in the animated virtual elements. In these cases, the co-existence of the real and the virtual enhances the realism of the digital elements, since they act in relation to the physical ones.

Sander Veenhof and Mark Skwarek organised *WeARinMoMA* (Veenhof and Skwarek, 2010), an intervention which hacked into

the MOMA's own collection, using the works in their collection as triggers for other virtual works, thus bringing new artists into the MoMA's exhibition rooms. Veenjof and Skwarek's intervention was part of New York's *Conflux Psychogeography* festival (Engberg & Bolter, 2014). This is a good example of how an augmented reality intervention can appear in a space without altering it.

In the 2011 Venice Biennale, there were two augmented reality interventions which had not been officially invited by the organisation: *Manifest.AR* and *The Invisible Pavilion*. The group Manifest.AR (2011), which includes Veenhof and Skwarek, created alternative pavilions to the existing ones, with 3D works that were superimposed onto various different selected environments. In this case, the augmented reality was activated via geolocation, so the works could only be seen in specific places, by means of a mobile phone Internet connection.

Les Liens Invisibles (Clemente Pestelli and Gionatan Quintini) and Simona Lodia created *The Invisible Pavilion* (2011), a similar intervention to *WeARinMoMA*, at the Venice Biennale, with nine invited artists, outside of the Biennale's official programme. The public could access their interventions through their mobile phone. The curator describes it thus: "The resulting experience is hallucinatory because it gives rise to a suspended sense of insight, which expands the boundaries of the world. A world understood here as a display surface, and as an extension of the exhibition space towards an infinite number of different planes of r/Reality" (Lodi, 2011). The duality (r/R) refers to everyday reality (with a lower-case r) compared to augmented Reality (with an upper-case R). This (r/R) can be seen as a marker of how the two sides of the physical/digital ecotone are perceived.

In the three previous interventions, a layer of artistic projects is added onto important institutional spaces without changing them. This approach has the potential to express reinterpretations or dialogues about existing works, which could be a very interesting strategy.

HYPER-REALITY, a video by Keiichi Matsuda (2016), represents a dystopian future, loaded with augmented reality elements which invade almost all of the urban landscape, and which constantly try to influence the protagonist as she moves around the city, inevitably more distracted by what is happening in the virtual environment than in the physical world. Matsuda thus reflects a future in which the physical and virtual words are very closely linked. Dystopian but not impossible, not all ecotones are ideal places for a healthier life, and neither are all ecosystems, which are sometimes deeply scarred by the excesses in human beings' lifestyles.

In these augmented reality projects, the ecotone has a circular border, which goes around the trigger. An invisible layer becomes visible by means of a device. A visual element activates the connectivity, and this puts us in contact with the digital information. The browser almost disappears, the digital information's URL goes unnoticed. Connectivity seems more natural and, in a way, it is, since we do not have to engage with any processes on an interface, yet on the other hand there is an almost magical effect, which brings about a certain lack of awareness about what is happening. Be careful! It could end up creating the same effect of realism that we instinctively get from photography, but that we now know is not true. A point of access between both ecosystems is created, which we see cohabiting in one ecotone, and so both environments are merged, leading to a very intense relationship with the real space.

4. Geolocation

Geolocation-based projects contribute different layers to the development of the physical/digital ecotone. On the one hand, geolocating artworks with a GPS allows data, narrations, soundscapes or other information to be associated with specific places, letting us add another non-Euclidian dimension to that space. Choosing a setting in which the sound created by the artist is combined

with the experience of the place, including, at least partly, the ambient sounds, can bring about interesting relations and generate a progressive transition between both environments. Some projects combine aspects of augmented reality with geolocation, insomuch that they are activated via geolocation. The projects I have chosen to focus on in this section use this global positioning technology as a key part of their narrative.

Christian Nold developed *Bio Mapping* (2006), a project which links geolocation with the emotional information experienced during a trip. Nold runs workshops in which the participants go on walking tours around different cities. Each participant wears sensors which measure their heartbeat and nervous condition, creating data which is gathered alongside their geolocation. When returning to the workshop, they talk about their tour, and they see the data. This emotional representation of the territory offers a dimension that is hardly ever taken into consideration in urban planning, or even in the artistic representation of the landscape: the emotional dimension of the experience in the urban context, where there are many more factors, beyond just the visual, that come into play. In this case, the transition to the physical/digital ecotone occurs via sensors that broaden out perception, towards something we could call 'cyberception'. This term, coined by the British artist and theoretician Roy Ascott, refers to the emerging human faculty of technologically augmented cognition and perception (Ascott, 2003), which allows us to perceive beyond the capabilities of our senses.

There are many different projects which work with the idea of drawing on the terrain by using applications that record the users' movements on their maps.

Jeremy Wood has been making GPS drawings since 2000 (Abrams, 2006). Following an initial period, in which he creates experiments with more or less recognisable forms, he decides to develop a larger-scale project, that of creating a visual diary of his life, recording all of his movements and adding another layer onto his map after each trip. He creates thus *My Ghost*, a trace of his

past, wherever he has been. Another of his projects is the series *GPS Sleep*, which he generates by activating a GPS device as he goes to sleep, placing it next to the window. Curiously, the system detects a lot of movement – one night, for example, it recorded 32 km worth of movements, some of which were more than 50 metres away from his bed. Wood comments that "the universe is being mapped faster and with evermore detail and precision. I'm curious to see what can be found in the advances and what is revealed in the limitations" (Wood, 2010). The inaccuracies are due to the changes of intensity in the signal, and the movement of the GPS satellites.

Meanwhile, other artists have used this method to create messages with greater political weight, such as Verónica Perales, who, in her project *Writing Letters to the Fox (GPS drawing performance)* (2018), draws the word 'FOX' in various different trips around London. In London there are many foxes, which can be seen at dusk on the edges of the green areas, in small ecotones. Perales came across a dead fox, which had been run over on a London street. A few days later it reappeared to her in a dream, and she thus started this project. As the artist explains, she started to write on the map as if it were a defence of space, as if it were an appropriation, as if her tracks were stitches trying to repair the rupture between the natural spaces and the spaces taken over by human activity (Perales, 2018). Perales shares her trips on running apps, so her maps-with-a-message are broadcast to this community.

The projects by Wood and Perales come from a more complex perspective than that of a shared drawing – their works, although planned out, are only made visible by recording digital data, and they take on a special meaning when the story behind them is revealed. The meaning of their being recorded, and the transition of the physical/digital ecotone, are made visible in their drawings. They embody what it means to live between the physical experience of moving around a space, and the recording of a symbolic memory of data in the 'cloud'.

Simon Weckert, with his *Google Maps Hacks* (2020), takes a very different approach to geolocation systems and their commercial uses. The artist placed 99 mobile phones inside a small hand-pulled cart, and he dragged it down the middle of a street. The phones were marking out a car journey, and due to the high volume of data and low speed, Google Maps concluded that there was a traffic jam, and thus began to advise other drives to take a detour. This is a good example of hacking the system: he created a virtual traffic jam, with consequences in the real world, i.e. that street was soon cleared of cars. When so many of our real-world decisions are being taken based on digital data, paradoxical situations can arise, such as this traffic jam created by a little hand-cart. This performance questions how geolocation management systems are influencing real cities, an error-strewn bridge in the physical/digital ecotone.

Frauke Behrendt, researcher at the University of Brighton, takes a similar view to my proposal that there is an ecotone in the relations between technology and the physical surroundings. Inspired by research into sound, mobile media and ecology, she presents an alternative way of framing the experiences of mobile listening, understanding mobile media as a 'kind of border', a term borrowed from ecology. She argues: "If we conceptualize mobile media as edge species - spending time in junctions between the techno-ecosystem of our cities and the natural ecosystem of our countryside and landscapes - this opens up a discussion around how mobile networked devices allow us to connect to rather than isolate us from our surroundings." She adds that "the metaphors of the ecotone, the edge effect, and edge species open up a new way of thinking about those areas where humans, mobile media, and landscapes increasingly co-exist. Despite the carbon footprint of mobile phones, smart phones and other mobile devices, I argue that the 'mobile media use' we observe in GPS sound walks have the potential to re-connect people with "natural ecosystems," especially when we consider the auditory dimensions of the experience and how walking operates as remixing" (Behrendt, 2013, p. 25).

Behrendt analyses the work by Teri Rueb called *Core Sample*. It is a GPS sound-walk, on Spectacle Island (part of Harbour Islands) in Boston, within a protected national park. The Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston presents it with the following words: "Discover unique combinations of natural and processed sounds [. . .] that correspond to Spectacle's many subterranean layers, as well as its present soundscape" (Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, 2007, p. 5).

In this case, the artist notes that the work was based on the theme "margin and edge and outcast" (Behrendt, 2003, p. 26). The island previously had many different uses: from being the location for casinos and hotels, to a rubbish dump, all in the same area. By 2007, it had all been restored. The participants in this intervention listen to specific sounds which are related to the past and present of the island, including abstract sounds, historical radio fragments, voices of former residents, etc. Behrendt maintains that the intersection of mobile media and the existing island environment could be understood as an ecotone (p. 25). And she continues to analyse the duality of the experience, given that "we are in the physical space of walking the island, but we are also in the mobile media space designed by the artist as we listen to the curated sounds alongside the island's soundscape" (p. 26).

5. Infodermis

I propose the term 'infodermis' to refer to the collection of flows of information that 'float' upon the physical space, like a skin of information. These flows of information come via wireless networks, like layers of information that we can make appear, with our electronic devices, by making use of augmented reality or geolocation (Landa, 2007).

The work by Clara Boj and Diego Díaz, *Observatorio* (2008), is a project that explores a particular band of the radio spectrum, i.e. that

of the wireless, 'wi-fi' networks. With a device similar to a periscope, which allows us to see a territory's 'surface', it is possible to locate and display the wi-fi networks in order to redraw the city's wave maps. To do this, they use a one-way antenna and a screen, built into the periscope. In the exhibition room, they projected a 360° panorama of the landscape outside. Flows of data in the urban space were made visible, the extensions of a virtual ecosystem built into the city. An 'infodermis' which is woven by the electronic communications systems, especially those which flow with all the freedom of waves. The ability to perceive them can be called 'cyberception', as an electronic extension of our senses (Ascott, 1994). The periscope, in this case, acts like a device which lets us see the digital ecosystem from the physical world, and the narrow border of the physical/digital ecotone is made patently clear. Also worth mentioning is *Wifipedia* (2015), by the artists Varvara Gulajeva and Mar Canet, in which they focus on individual wi-fi networks. In this project, the artists capture the names and locations of the wi-fi networks as they go on several journeys by bike, and on foot, around various cities. Tallinn was their first stop, with a total of 23,893 networks, and they later carried out the same project in Seoul and Buenos Aires. Canet and Gulajeva (2018) were interested in exploring the layer of urban information and its density of networks. They wanted to highlight, metaphorically, the city's digital landscape, and the invisible layer of communication and creativity of its inhabitants, as expressed in the networks' names. These names often contained messages for the neighbours, expressing aspects of political or religious identity, or even messages targeted at particularly annoying neighbours. This is a clear example of revealing part of the public/private infodermis of a city. The work was presented as a series of maps and a kind of phone directory with all the information they recorded.

6. Conclusions

The expression of the physical/digital ecotone in these artistic projects has resulted in some important contributions, among which the following can be highlighted:

- The more developed a digital culture is, the more clearly the physical/digital ecotone takes form.
- There have been synaesthetic contributions to this field, which combine vision and touch in telepresence-based projects (Galloway and Rabinowitz, and Sermon), and which seek new forms of interacting in the cyberspace. Paul Sermon has made interesting points about the disappearance of technology which led to the rise of a new form of communication. Undoubtedly, there is scope for the further development of this relationship, between videoconferencing and the design of spaces that stimulate new forms of interaction. Connectivity in the natural ecotones boosts biodiversity and supports sustainability, and something similar could happen in the physical/digital ecotone.
- As noted by Queau, there are different degrees of intensity in the forms of telepresence. To that we can add that the same applies to the connectivity between both sides of the physical/digital ecotone.
- The gradual and subtle disappearance or integration of some interfaces (of augmented reality or devices for orientation) make moving around the physical/digital ecotone a more fluid experience. This kind of fluidity, in connective technology, can lead to new forms of interaction, but it can also make us less conscious, and more vulnerable to being manipulated (most notably described by Weckert).
- Fostering the connectivity between both sides of an ecotone can boost the diversity of the species in both ecosystems. This article does not examine this area in depth, but if we were to analyse the great variety of artistic projects that work

with digital information and its physical expression, we might consider it to be a fertile "garden of hypothesis", as Ascott (2003) would put it.

- As our digital ecosystem becomes more and more complex, it is worth developing ways to visualise the density and intensity of its signals. Taking the invisible and making it visible in the infodermis might help us understand our own electromagnetic pollution.
- There could be further development in the field of telepresence for blind people, following the example of Rockeby.
- The ecotone of augmented reality invites us to see the world through an alternative reality as superimposed upon an imposed reality, as if it were a Temporary Autonomous Zone, a TAZ (Bey, 1991). What would happen if the *Artvertiser* prototype became a simple, accessible Temporary Autonomous Vision, a TAV? Could we walk around with a filter that prevents us from seeing the constant onslaught of unwanted adverts?
- The growing verisimilitude of augmented reality leads us to the same problem that arose with photography, i.e. the tricking of our instincts about what we see as real. But in this case, it can be very closely connected to the physical reality. This is an opportunity for art, yet this technology might well be exploited with dubious intentions.
- Augmented reality is also an opportunity to develop new forms of publication, closely linked to that which they analyse or rework.
- Broadening out cyberception or data collection in our surroundings, and how this can translate our feelings, helps us understand our surroundings better. Many scientific sensors can already do this, but there is still a lot to be done from the artistic perspective, through the scientific gaze.
- Those projects that embody what it means to live between physical experience and the recording of a symbolic memory of data are undergoing great development, because new ways

of looking at our surroundings are being created, as well as new ways of recording symbolic elements for our remembering of them.

- The more interfaces, bridges, pores and interactions there are between the digital and physical ecosystems, the more opportunities we have to develop artistic languages that articulate our relationships in a profoundly digital culture, one which is increasingly aware of the need to make a conscious effort to conserve our planet.
- The borders of the digital/physical ecotone are not presented on one plane, but rather on a multitude of them; some turn into folds, while others open up into bubbles. The rhizomatic structure of the Internet could find, in this physical/digital encounter, a complementary parallel: the sponge. As Ivars (2018, p. 68) asks, ". . . might the sponge, with its infinite labyrinth and its unique structure of creases and holes, be the hidden and essential side of the rhizome's infinite and substantial labyrinth?"
- As a possible future line of work, there could be further research into the processes that emerge in natural ecotones, with a view to pre-empting situations in the physical/digital ecotone.
- We are getting closer and closer to Neal Stephenson's idea of "Earth as Universal Desktop" (in *Snow Crash*, 1992).

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Arts and the Commons

Practices of Cultural Expropriation in the Age of the Network Superstructure

Carlos Escaño

«La propriété étant un droit inviolable et sacré, nul ne peut en être privé, si ce n'est lorsque la nécessité publique, légalement constatée, l'exige évidemment, et sous la condition d'une juste et préalable indemnité»

Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one can be deprived of private usage, if it is not when the public necessity, legally noted, evidently requires it, and under the condition of a just and prior indemnity.

Article XVII, Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (French National Constituent Assembly, 1789)

1. Prologue

4'33" is a musical work created by the composer John Cage in 1952. It consists of silence. Nothing but silence. Silence for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. In 2002, the band The Planets released their album *Classical Graffiti*. The thirteenth song on the album was called 'A One Minute Silence'. Exactly one minute of silence. It was reported that John Cage's estate had sued The Planets for plagiarism. They were accused of having plagiarised silence.

In the end, it was settled out of court, but the controversy caused a media storm which served to highlight the crucial issue of copyright: silence, one of the most beautiful common goods in existence, was at the centre of a potential lawsuit. What will be the next commonly-owned space to be closed off, commodified and appropriated?

2. Introduction: common artistic spaces *between* subjectivities

We excitedly and openly witness the infinite proliferation of the work of art in its reception, reading, expectation and symbolic reinterpretation. This idea was noted by Eco (1989) when he alluded to the great opportunities, in the range of cultural output, for making unforeseeable aesthetic discoveries. Similarly, Gadamer (1998) stated that all artworks acquire a certain richness that moves away from the univocal, and they thus take on an endlessly interpretive and multivocal character. This diversity of interpretation is multiplied by the sheer vastness of the community of agents who access, produce and reproduce the creative dialectic in the arts. There is thus a clear conclusion to be inferred from this, one which alludes to the arts as a form of thinking that is inscribed within this community, a form always somewhere between the singular and the plural, in a community that emerges and develops by moving from person to person (Pontbriand, 2013): commonality helps us

create a link with the arts, a practice that is itself located somewhere 'between' – between the individual and the collective, between the self and the experience of the world, between the self and the other. This connection is further perpetuated as the community develops, reinterprets, symbolises, produces and reproduces these aesthetic discoveries. The relationship in question, i.e. between the community and the arts, reminds us that Barthes (1986) claimed there is no time other than that of enunciation, and this, ultimately, supports the idea that everything is written in the here and now. And that, even if certain ideological structures seek to alter the times, the community-based relations and the modes of channelling aesthetic discourses, these are all contradicted in the act itself of aesthetic discovery and production, which – permanently and presently – crosses over all cultural generations, an act that comes from the conceiving and sharing of our knowledge, culture and artistic creation.

3. Network Superstructure and Empire

Paul de Man (1996) explained that, whether we know it or not, whether we like it or not, many of us are somewhat Hegelian when we try to think of historical periodisation as the development of an individual or collective consciousness. This periodising (therefore Hegelian) logic entails a collective categorisation of consciousness in the way it deals with the concept of the network superstructure. The allusion to Marxist theory – which is clearly indebted to the Hegelian school of thought –, as a way of justifying the concept, is inexcusable. In social production, certain relations are established, and they make up the economic structure – the infrastructure –, i.e. the foundation upon which a juridical and political superstructure is built: in other words, the mode of production of material life conditions the process of social, political and spiritual life (Marx, 1970). If we change this economic foundation, the superstructure built upon it could also be transformed: the juridical, political,

religious, artistic and philosophical forms – or rather, the ideological forms.

Nevertheless, assuming the existence of a superstructure means acknowledging a certain conceptual premise: the idea of ideology. As Juan Martín Prada (2001) notes, the concept of ideology still comes up in the works of authors such as Hall, Eagleton and Fraser, who continue to defend its relevance for the analysis of cultural and artistic output. In contrast, this concept is largely rejected by the theoreticians of difference, such as Deleuze, Guattari and Foucault, who inspired postmodern social theories. The concept of ideology itself is deemed typical of the decline in metanarratives as indicated by Lyotard (1984): the end of meta-storytelling, the end of history, the end of the subject. The end of ideologies.

The postmodernisation of the infrastructure conforms to new parameters that are discussed and expounded in socioeconomic theory from opposing ideological poles. As such, it is condemned within post-Marxist reflection and the approaches of new liberalism. As Hardt and Negri (2006) point out, the new system that emerged in the late 20th century is not only defined by the decline of the nation states, by the deregulation of the international markets and the end of antagonistic conflicts between states – the new paradigm is both a system and a hierarchy, a centralised set of rules and a vast production of legitimacy, spread far and wide around the world. A dynamic, systemic structure, the *Empire* – as Hardt and Negri call it – is formed, not only out of sheer force, but also out of the ability to present said force as a good at the service of justice and peace. We should not think of nation states as supreme, sovereign authorities, neither outside their borders, nor inside. Sovereignty has taken on a new form, made up of a series of national and supranational organisms, united by one single logic of power: the Empire. As Braudel (1977) has stressed, capitalism only triumphs when it becomes identified with the state, when it *is* the state.

Those theories which heralded the end of history and all its ideologies lose political ground when one of them actually reaches

hegemony. Fredric Jameson (1991) highlighted the meaning of postmodernism as its being the cultural reflection of a triumphant metanarrative. It has been proven that the state ideology and superstructure have become less prominent, and they do not adapt with the necessary political precision in order to suit the present globalised context. In their place, the concept of Empire has proven useful, as a dominant ideology, as well as a new superstructure: a network superstructure, which, as a comparable exertion of power, maintains certain important ideological apparatuses that allow for its own development and self-preservation. This exertion of power serves to perpetuate a particular cultural system.

The superstructure, that social layer that includes the legal-political and ideological authorities, now becomes a plural and transnational action, in the interests of the hegemony of the empire. This is a network superstructure, compound and diverse, more complex than the nation state. The network superstructure obeys the nature of the network society in which we live together.

4. Neoliberal hegemonic apparatuses: the appropriation of the common

Social and historical experience has shown us that, since the end of the 20th century, late capitalism, marked by globalisation, and neoliberal in nature, has constructed the ideology of the Empire, using strategies no longer exclusively controlled by states, and which determine our social space. Within this context, the concept of ideology is still useful for carrying out a reading of our post-digital society. From a Gramscian perspective, the superstructure and infrastructure have reciprocal influence on each other, and their perseverance can be ascribed to what Althusser (2014) called 'ideological apparatuses', which, in line with this Gramscian view, can be understood as hegemonic devices. There has been a transfer of power, from the state to the empire, and the apparatuses for the exertion

of power and the ensured reproduction of the material requirements for production have altered their own activity and complexity. The states' ideological apparatuses, such as schools, juridical and political apparatuses, information, as well as the cultural institutions, have all undergone an evolution in their modes, management and expansion, albeit with the same clear objective: to ensure the Empire's control over freedom, and the much-desired unification of the *res publica* and the *res privata*. The network superstructure groups together a combination of ideological apparatuses in order to achieve hegemony and keep on with the interminable action of merging the commons and the private spheres, until it is complete. Adapting Braudel's idea: capitalism only triumphs when it becomes identified with the commons, when the commons become private. Following Gruppi (1972), it can be inferred, from this complex development, that hegemony has achieved not only an institutional and economic political action, but it is also cultural, moral, and of a global, supra- and transnational worldview. Within this network superstructure it is worth highlighting the importance of those cultural approaches which, ultimately, obey political actions. To do so, we should consider exactly how different hegemonic apparatuses have been implemented, i.e. those which allow for the consolidation of this network superstructure.

4.1. 1st hegemonic apparatus: digital enclosures

From the 15th to the 19th century, the common lands in England were enclosed. These lands had previously been common to all, but they were transformed into private spaces, controlled by a single proprietor (Boyle, 2008). The feudal lords, legitimised by the 'Inclosure Acts' (legislation developed with the express purpose of expropriating lands, in the old spelling), claimed ownership of these lands – often resorting to violence – that had otherwise belonged to everybody, for communal use. These enclosures were a revolution of the rich against the poor, turning the social order

on its head, and destroying old rights and customs (Polanyi, 2001). This became known as the first enclosure movement. James Boyle (2008) establishes, by extrapolation, a direct link with today's post-digital world, where a second enclosure movement is in force: digital enclosures, a contemporary globalist strategy for the privatisation of knowledge and culture, as perpetrated in the digital context by its association with the copyright model, which in turn has its own international appropriation strategy. We can see how, today, a political and juridical space has been established which reinforces the privatisation of non-physical common goods, on behalf of corporations who fence off and enclose knowledge. That is, they favour contracts that turn intellectual output into an exclusive good, commodifying it, and laying out an entire structure of multilateral international agreements so that these 'communal digital lands' can be exploited, following artificial logics that are limiting and competitive. To speak of digital enclosures is to speak of the apparent need for intellectual property rights, as in laws such as ACTA in Europa, SOPA in the United States, or TRIPS agreements and treaties such as TTIP (Martínez, 2012). In the network society, the international legal framework supports and enforces the copyright model and the appropriationist activity of the Empire, with devastating effects that curb common cultural action, and where the digital context is its favoured field of action.

4.2. 2nd hegemonic apparatus: Han's digital panopticon

Bentham's panopticon, as an architectural device of imprisonment, is the embodiment of the disciplinary society of control. A penitentiary space, designed in the modern era so that all the prisoners are visible to the guards. Anybody who is aware of the fact they are being watched thus reproduces, of their own accord, the coercive actions of power, leading to a state where power works automatically, where the subjects modify their own behaviour (Foucault, 1977). The residents of today's panopticon, i.e. the digital

panopticon, communicate with each other intensely and they willingly expose themselves – that is, they actively participate in the construction of the panopticon (Han, 2017). Surveillance becomes a shameless, guilt-free act, since, according to Han, the inmates voluntarily make themselves visible, and they freely give out their own information, not out of coercion, but out of an internal need. This is an act of self-exploitation, but it comes with a feeling of freedom (Han, 2015; Zafra, 2017). The digital panopticon is crudely manifested in the 'big data' operations of the 4.0 industry, and the social networking services are the tip of the iceberg, which work with a two-sided form of control. On the one hand, the control exerted works better within a digital field that is hegemonised by the corporation of the Empire: Facebook, Instagram and Twitter filter out content, depending on certain political and cultural narratives. On the other hand, the very nature of the Internet is shrunk down: hypertext is constricted, and expressive and cultural freedom is limited to an enclosed space in the network.

The digital society of control makes widespread use of 'freedom', and 'transparency' is really a neoliberal device to ensure that individual freedom is manifested as capital freedom. The free individual is degraded to being a sex organ of capital: "[Capital] copulates with the Other of itself by way of individual freedom" (Han, 2015, p. 4). Self-exploitation in the guise of freedom, and willing internal action that is systematised and then spread on the network – this is all far more efficient than external coercion. Even so, with this hypothesis, Han does not acknowledge the fact that when the existence of a systemic network is pointed out, an artifact of external control is thus generated. The digital network was born as a hybrid agent, post-digital, made up of an algorithm and a network of subjects. It is a system that in itself facilitates a framework for organised internal coercion. Therefore, we can infer that it works as an external network that fosters internal coercion. It is an exogenic system that takes advantage of the individual's endogenous psychological mechanisms. Informative, emotional and

communicative relations between peers are exposed to alienation. Digital communicative action is a new form of production which eliminates all distance in favour of speed (Han, 2015), leading to a context that paves the way for the commons to be turned into a commodified space.

4.3. 3rd hegemonic apparatus: software and ideological control

Software is a layer that covers all the areas of contemporary societies, and if we want to understand but also participate in the current methods of control, communication, representation, simulation, analysis, decision-making, memory, vision, writing and interaction, we must not overlook the role of software (Manovich, 2013): the functional elements of social media and mobile phones have today formed their own ecosystem, and software has become the world's interface. Within this interface, due attention should be paid to the programming of the social networking services themselves, as well as the programming of the media software for creating contemporary aesthetics and culture. On the one hand, there is the software developed by Adobe, Apple, Cowpland Research Laboratory and other corporations, for the generation of cultural production, and on the other hand there is the software that sustains and shapes social networks, like Facebook or TikTok, developed as exclusive products. In other words, great swathes of the entire worldwide cultural output depend on the programming of software that, in terms of usage and development, is by definition completely opaque and impenetrable, and cannot be reproduced or studied. This is an attack on transparency and the dissemination of knowledge as a common good, and it asserts blatant ideological control over such knowledge. It is impossible to view the algorithms that this software uses, and this is an advantage for the enaction of Han's panopticon-style control, where the external network of coercion is not visible.

5. Production, property and cultural commons in the network superstructure

"The production of experience, subjectivity, the production of community, of the affects or of concepts, of passion or sense, the production of desire, the production of meaning... everything is production. Nothing today can evade its being included in this process" (Brea, 2007, p. 35). The Empire system absorbs all human action: everything exists under the cloak of production. The act of producing itself has its value, carried out by a workforce who sustain the production of experience, community, concepts or emotions. Non-material work is the coming together and realisation of affective and intellective work, of work that produces concepts and desires, as well as how they are to be negotiated (Brea, 2007).

A distinguishing feature of the production of non-material commodities regards the issue of ownership itself. Essentially, the production, reproduction and transmission of non-material goods, whether in the form of symbols, codes, signs, emotions or responsibilities, does not involve any act of dispossession from whoever produced it (Brea, 2007). The sharing of ideas, emotions and symbols is a natural act per se. The commons make their nest in this nature. These things exist in order to be given away, to be possessed and shared, and it must be accepted, responsibly and reciprocally, that they are intended for permanent (re)production. As such, the production of non-material goods is a natural feature of the commons, but forcing an artificial framework to be built around it leads to it becoming a terrain for lawsuits and debate around these goods' inherent propensity to reproduce. There is not a natural scarcity of ideas and information (Vaidhayanathan, 2001) – instead, artificial scarcity arises because of the legal and juridical system (of western intellectual property), regarding the creation of its products. This system has brought with it a globalist colonising process, where peripheral nations have been forced to import the western legal imaginary and copyright legislation, with the result being

that those forms of community-based knowledge – which do not fit into the copyright model – are not recognised, and hegemony is ceded to the political and cultural west (Martínez-Cabezudo, 2014). The intellectual property system is the fundamental ideological legitimisation of digital enclosure, and it works to safeguard the panopticon, serving as an ally in the development of exclusive software.

Here, in this context of production and property, is where the cultural aspect is subjected to a fundamental contradiction: culture is a territory with a fluctuating and diverse history of expression, of transience, of community-based experience in a space somewhere 'between', ever subjugated by an infrastructure and superstructure that control, reorganise and oppress its very nature. For this contradiction to be resolved, a reappraisal of the cultural commons is necessary, for the sake of protecting and revitalising its nature.

If we accept the didactic explanations of the P2P Foundation (Bauwens, Kostakis, Troncoso, & Utratel, 2017), the commons are to be understood as a form of social organisation, incorporated into the space of governance that has historically been seized by means of the institutional exercising of the concept of the State. We could also include here another supranational organisational dynamic which is determined by the international economic relations of the market – as embodied in the figure of the Empire – and these relations also serve as the organising agent of society, insomuch as, depending on its degree of influence, it sets out the social and cultural relations between these states. Yochai Benkler (2003) points out the institutional categorisation which ensures that the concept of the commons remains oriented towards a governance of the use and provision of all those resources that belong to everybody. This backs up the idea that no individual person or hands can have exclusive control over their use and provision, and it proposes that those resources catalogued as common goods can and must be at the disposal of a community, based on clearly defined rules. In short, the concept of the commons "is a general term that refers to

a resource shared by a group of people" (Hess & Ostrom, 2007, p. 4). This categorisation is characterised by its diversity, elusiveness and breadth (Lafuente, 2007). That is, the commons are elusive because they are a benefit that we only really perceive when they are under threat, they are diverse because they can have many different modes of existence, and wide-reaching because they encompass a broad range of distinct natural, social and bodily goods.

5.1. Practices of cultural expropriation in the age of the network superstructure

In order to contextualise the practical forms of action that challenge the paradigmatic framework of cultural property, it is worth focusing on the idea of appropriation. The postmodern cultural emergence at the end of the 20th century led to the analysis of the practice of appropriation, which plays a prominent role insomuch as it allows for the analysis of all forms of representation, not only the image or representational sign, but also all the cultural institutions and the history of art as instruments of power (Martín Prada, 2001). Martín Prada (2001), following Kuspit, indicates that the critical potential of appropriation is not present in most appropriationist practices, which have turned it into a language-based procedure. Those which do carry out a critical exercise go beyond the exposing of totalitarian social ideologies, and they call into question totalitarian artistic ideology, that is, the idea that art administers perception, with aesthetic and spiritual aims.

There are appropriationist dynamics that seek to reflect upon and act critically against the hegemonic framework of cultural ownership, focusing on the network superstructure - they could also be called practices of *cultural expropriation*. Thomas Ziehe (1991) uses the term, in a highly negative sense, to refer to the way in which the media colonises individuals' ways of living and imaginaries. In the present article, we consider the concept in a more positive light, because it re-establishes equity and works towards emancipation. Regarding

public law, expropriation is understood as a transferral from private ownership to the state, as and when required for the social good. Under this perspective, and bearing in mind the ideological parameters and apparatuses of the network superstructure, the complexity of generating hegemony goes far beyond the sphere of the state. Taking care of public goods and issues is a responsibility of the commons, transcending the borders of the nation states, beyond their remits that are so curtailed by national partitions. Cultural expropriation therefore becomes an act of symbolic resistance, protection and warning, based on commonality: to return to common ownership that which has been snatched away. It is about understanding the idea of expropriation as a space for political demands, and as way of warning against hegemonic practices. Expropriation should be interpreted both in metaphorical and activist terms: to foster the construction of a collective imaginary which protects the commons by means of appropriationist practices. In turn, it influences those politically and socially articulated values that generate (counter-)hegemony, helping in the struggle to oppose those schemes, plotted by the neoliberal structure, in which the model of copyright and intellectual property is deployed as a colonising battering ram. This blunt force is used in the interests of propagating its juridical-legal strategy and, along with it, hyper-commodification. A work of expropriation that benefits the commons. Enforcing the copyright model involves a permanent work of enclosure, while expropriation seeks out those escape routes, oversights and practices that might help bring back into collective ownership those areas that have been alienated, taken away. These appropriationist – expropriating – techniques re-establish the *inalienable and sacred* right of the need for public and common goods.

There are forms of commons-style appropriationism on the Internet that reveal, more so than any other strategy, the so-called 'anthropological turn', almost ethnographic, in current artistic creation, as noted by Martín Prada (2018). These strategies focus on the accumulation of materials, on collage, repetition, imitation, irony and parody, DJ-like actions, practices of collective creation, remixing,

remaking and tasks of archiving and selection/transformation. Broadly speaking, appropriationism has followed the methodological tradition that began with the concept of the ready-made in the early 20th century, or the practices of cutting, mounting and mixing by Hindemith in the 1920s, or by Schaffer in the mid-century. Now that they are immersed in the digital age, appropriationist dynamics have been further elaborated by names such as Sollfrank, Napier Koening, Kutiman, Bard, Burks and Bookchin.

These actions and direct references inspire work that comes under an expropriationist perspective of the network superstructure, where a symbolic casuistry should be pointed out:

First of all, there is a very recent and clear example of expropriation, one which deals with the conservation and evolution of the ecosystem around the commons of digital art. In February 2020, Damien Riehl and Noah Rubin copyrighted 68.7 million melodies, which were subsequently returned to the public domain (via the platform archive.org). The melodies were generated based on basic combinations of musical notes, developed by an algorithm that operated at a rate of 300,000 combinations per second (Cole, 2020). Each year, tens of millions of songs are released globally, and since the combinations of notes are very limited, it is more and more likely that songs will coincide and use the same or very similar sequences. The ultimate aim was to protect artists from plagiarism lawsuits. It was an exercise in the protection of the commons, the protection of the basis of the musical universe.

Elsewhere, there is the practice of the parodic political remix. A good example is *Déjalo salir #8M #HuelgaFeminista* ('Let It Out #8thMarch #FeministStrike'), by Zemos98 and United Unknown. It is a satirical piece which plays around with the remake and the political remix, making use of the aesthetics of advertising (it remixes the famous Kenzo advert directed by Spike Jonze in 2016), in which there is an apparent criticism of the depoliticised workings of so-called liberal feminism. Along similar lines of political remixing is *El político neoliberal* ('The Neoliberal Politician', 2013) by Pony

Bravo, which condemns, by means of parody, the economic and hegemonic episteme by representing its world leaders. In these cases, the expropriating logic is seen in the construction of a commons-like political discourse, using an otherwise fenced-off aesthetic universe. They are a direct appropriation of the codes of audiovisual storytelling, as a way of developing political and social resistance and strategies that are based on the commons.

Fig. 1: Screenshot from *Déjalo salir #8M #HuelgaFeminista* ('Let It Out #8thMarch #FeministStrike'), by United Unknown and Zemos98. Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZqhbCSMAtXU>

In a similar way, as a strategy for deconstructing the discourse around the concept of the author (a linchpin for the idea of intellectual property), it is worth mentioning the line of action in the project Stray Cinema (2009-11), developed by Michelle Joy Lloyd, which used the discourse of open and collective remixing, where the different audiovisual products were constructed with shared footage that was available to all participants. This was a thought-provoking piece about the creation of the hegemonic cultural narrative in the network superstructure, achieved by showing other

possibilities for taking part in the cultural landscape and legacy by means of community-based methods and usages. Along these lines, it is also worth highlighting the exquisite remixing in the 'narrative movie mashups' by Da Silva, notably *Hell's Club* (2015, 2017). It is a masterclass in editing, with great attention to detail, which ironically reaches the same conclusion: appropriation has great potential for storytelling, for forming new narratives based on the existing cultural heritage. That is, to *return* something to collective use, something which in theory should not have to be returned, given that it was originally intended to be accessed and enjoyed by the spectator, as a universal right.

Fig. 2: Screenshots from *Hell's Club* (2015) by Antonio Maria Da Silva (AMDSFILMS). Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QajyNRnyPMs>

Finally, there is a third casuistric mode that is worth highlighting, as shown in the performative action *Torture Classics* (2010) by Bernhard and Lizvlx, in which they present a selection of sixty pop hits that have been illegally copied for this art project. This compilation features a collection of songs used by the United States army to torture prisoners at the Guantanamo Bay detention camp. The piece invites us to reflect on the legality and supposed legitimacy of torture, as opposed to the illegal use of a copyright-protected production. This reflection addresses, bluntly, the absurdity of (digital) enclosures enforced by a network superstructure, and it warns us of the terrifying power of cultural policies, as well as social and globalist policies.

6. In conclusion

Contemporary artistic action, in its discourse of permanent reconstruction and variability, reflects a general trend in our culture towards processes of multivocality and multiple possibilities (Eco, 1992). This essential fact plants a contradiction at the very heart of the neoliberal model, which is devoted to perpetuating a one-way and excluding productive/political line. At the turn of the millennium, as this superstructure was garnering great strength, most postmodern political theory warned that the only effective route to true social change would be to bolster the lines of resistance against the existing forms of power, rather than seeking to overthrow it (Martín Prada, 2001). This situation could be understood as a kind of 'utopia of fear', alluding to and readapting Judith Shklar's thesis (1989) when, under the principle of negativity, she proposed that the ultimate goal should not be to set up desirable situations, but rather to prevent reprehensible ones. Of course, today's culture offers us a whole range of necessary post-digital forms of resistance, which allow for a reversal of the ownership dynamics that are implemented and reproduced with the hegemonic apparatuses of the network superstructure. They are forms of resistance configured as commons-like practices to alert to and point out how to generate (contra)hegemonic actions and thought. But the futility of devising systemic alternatives, and the firm belief that there is no heuristic possibility of coming up with other (common) worlds, all form part of the many effects propitiated by the same hegemonic apparatuses of the network superstructure. Therefore, aside from seeming to be spaces for resistance against hegemonic power relations, the forming of cultural utopias is still a social and historical imperative, an exercise in responsibility that involves all the agents involved in the cultural discourse, all those who reside somewhere *between* their artistic education, research and production. *Omnia sunt communia*; all things are held in common.

"Plus on est de fous, plus on rit."
(French refrain; "The more, the merrier.")

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Bodies and Gazes

Juan Martín Prada

1. *Ideal* images

Social media stars have hundreds of thousands of followers who hypnotically enjoy images of *ideal* bodies, those enticing appearances that spark intense dynamics of identification. These keen admirers are drawn in by a deluge of representations in which carefully planned-out photoshoots (posed and set up meticulously, to accentuate every single detail of the image, each aspect of the hairstyle, each fashion accessory) appear alongside apparently spontaneous snapshots from some ordinary moment of the day (the assumption being that absolutely every part of a celebrity's life is important).

The search for *authenticity* is seen today in images that are subjected to Instagram filters or more profound transformations on Photoshop. This is not the era, however, of simulations, but rather of *true* appearances. Vanity and banality have become *authenticity*. These times can probably be defined by the *excessive* presence of images, in which, by adoring them, we can easily be overwhelmed by the visual specifications of the supposed ideal forms of femininity

and masculinity. In turn, these forms are validated by the hundreds of thousands of 'likes' and flattering comments that fly in from all over the planet. Those who follow the it-girls and boys[1] of the Internet are bombarded, on the screens of their connective devices, with enticing lifestyles in which millions of individuals cannot help but project themselves in a picture-perfect, ideal form. It seems that, today, we only know how to authentically assert our freedom from within the walls of this prison of ideal set-ups.

Being photogenic and charismatic, key traits for any social media star, are just as important as being self-confident – this is crucial for the sought-after magnetism necessary to draw people in. There must also be a hint of non-conformism (albeit perfectly adapted to the consumer culture), which always comes across as inspiring, creating thus the effect of the coveted sense of being free, of being able to be oneself. This is a spectacularised selfhood which is always dependent on being highly versatile in the arts of enjoyment, and it is invariably enchanting.

Idealisation occurs when an image assumes the condition of a mirror, when we yearn to see ourselves in it, when it becomes the pristine surface on which we so crave to glimpse our own reflection. Everything that you could ever hope for in life appears in images shot through with glamour, luxury, fun and freedom. Life is no longer the invention of *oneself*; it has become the struggle for it to look like somebody else's. Celebrities, who devote their time to showing us their lives, act as inspiration, as influencers, and they take advantage thus of our own identity-based shortcomings and desires.

Fame has gradually turned into one of the most highly-esteemed elements in our culture, to the same or an even greater extent than wealth. In any case, we tend to think of the two as inseparable. Following famous people on social media, trying to be an extra-special fan, posting comments under their photos or showing admiration with emojis and 'likes', is all a way of compensating for

[1] This term dates back to 1926, popularised by Elinor Glyn's novel *It*.

our desire to be close to those whose lives we would like (totally, or partially) for ourselves.

The idealised image often features a combination of the most celebrated bodily values, based on highly specific physical parameters which almost always match the normative forms, or certain lifestyles that are assumed to be enviable. Such an image works like a reflective surface upon which, more than anything, subjects try to find themselves.

The issue of idealisation cannot be analysed, though, without first considering the inherent complexity of mirror logics. In truth, looking at another human being always entails seeing ourselves reflected in the other. This is the only way to explain, for example, the gesture of looking away that Silverman (1996) acknowledges: "I always studiously avoid looking at the homeless people, whom, with ruthless arbitrariness, I either help or don't help" (p. 26). What she describes here is the symptom of a very specific mirrored panic: "If homeless, I would precisely no longer be "myself." And rather than acceding to this politically imperative self-estrangement, I automatically avert my eyes" (ibid.).

Racism, xenophobia and aporophobia might therefore be considered symptoms of a visual pathology related to these kinds of reflexive projection mechanisms. We tend to reject that which does not replicate what we want to be, we avert our eyes from those who have an appearance that we do not want – looking at them would be, above all, not wanting to *see ourselves* in the same way.

We have heard countless times how idealisation cannot be understood without what Lacan called the 'mirror stage', the moment that marks, forever, our alienation in the imaginary. The mirror is a mysterious object, so often defined as a threshold-phenomenon, demarcating the limits between the imaginary and the symbolic (Eco, 1986). And there might be many demonstrable similarities between the individual's reaction to the range of ideal images that reach them through the mirror-screen of their computer, and the child's reaction to seeing their own reflected image, as described by

Lacan: anticipated, insufficient, assuming the armour of an alienating identity – an "orthopaedic" image of their totality (1949/2006, p. 78).

We are what we are, according to Eco (1986), precisely because we are also catoptric animals – we have developed the dual ability to look at ourselves and others "in both our and their perceptive reality and catoptric virtuality" (p. 207). But we must recognise that we always have a pathological relationship with our reflection in the mirror – it tells the truth, but perhaps too honestly, and even, therefore, "to an inhuman extent" (p. 208).

It is not merely incidental that Eco himself conjectured there might be a 'photograph stage', another possible phase in the subject's ontogenesis. The *heteromateriality* of the photographic plate, which he called a kind of 'freezing mirror' (p. 222), an imprint or a trace, would nevertheless explain why this supposed 'photograph stage' comes much later than the 'mirror stage': "A baby has no problems in recognizing his image reflected in a mirror, whereas a child up to five years of age finds it very difficult (and requires some sort of training) to identify photographed objects" (p. 223). In any case, the implications of this supposed 'photograph stage', in terms of the development of subjectivity, still need to be studied in depth.

But let us return to the workings of idealisation, and our attempts at bridging the gap between ourselves and those ideal images, as well as how we try to identify with the visual *imago* and become, for others, what these images are for us. That way, perhaps we might try to *enslave* them, as ideal images have enslaved us.

Reaching the ideal is an endless task, one which is never completely achievable. The hundreds of near-identical selfies on many users' accounts might be proof of these continuous attempts to get closer to the ideal image, to try and see one's own reflection in this ideal. It is often a trial-and-error approach (photographic self-representation today tends to come, invariably, in a series), which creates some moments of happiness (perhaps the same type of *joie* that the child feels in front of the Lacanian mirror), like when somebody feels that they resemble, or are at least approaching, somehow, the ideal *imago*.

This satisfaction comes from a sense of 'completeness' and 'unity', caused by this approximation, this resemblance. These moments of pleasure, though, can only ever be sporadic: the sensation of getting closer to the ideal image never quite quenches the thirst, and instead it tends to provoke a distressing feeling of insufficiency.

Kundera (1988/1991) said that "a person may conceal himself behind his image, he can disappear forever behind his image, he can be completely separated from his image: a person can never be his image" (p. 315). This is perhaps especially evident in those cases that have revealed, somewhat upsettingly, what is actually hiding behind these ideal images.[2] Adam Curtis (2017) was right when he noted that "things like Instagram are the socialist realism of our times because they represent the image of happy people. To a certain extent it's true, or so they believe, but the complex difficulty behind it is hidden".

Many of the photographs shared by the most 'followed' celebrities are, despite their seeming spontaneity, the result of meticulous preparation and manipulation, following a selection process in which images that are too 'real' are not shared (these celebrities are terrorised by the fear that posting such an image might lead to a drop in followers).[3] We are all fetishists, to a greater or lesser extent, who bow down to the logics of the new forms of the spectacle through

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[2] We should remember, for example, the case of Essena O'Neill, who had hundreds of thousands of followers on Instagram and YouTube, before she decided to quit social media in November 2015. She said she felt lost, "with serious problems so beautifully hidden". As cited by Elle Hunt, 'Instagram star Essena O'Neill: 'The way it all turned so negative just numbed me". *The Guardian*, 5th January 2016. [https://www.theguardian.com/media/2016/jan/05/instagram-star-essena-oneill-the-way-it-all-turned-so-negative-just-numbed-me].

[3] See Heather Saul, 'Stina Sanders' Instagram lost thousands of followers after she shared realistic images for a week'. *The Independent*, 20th November 2015 [https://www.independent.co.uk/news/people/model-stina-sanders-loses-thousands-of-instagram-followers-after-sharing-unrealistic-images-for-a-a6742806.html]. In fact, the assertion that "it's not real life" was part of the model and blogger Stina Sanders' justification

our smartphone screens. On these screens, the substitution described by Debord (1967/2014) still applies, i.e. the replacing of the tangible world by images that go on top of it, supplanting it, and they appear, at the same time, "as the perceptible par excellence" (p. 14). These forms of *augmented survival* are just superficially new, associated with what only *seem* to be lived experiences, and with seductively simplified lives. This alienation, in relation to the contemplated object, has a very specific consequence, also highlighted by Debord in the late 1970s: the more we accept that we recognise ourselves in the dominant images, the less able we are to understand our existence, our *own* desire.

We have no way of knowing whether, on social media, our pictures are forcing us to be more like actors (in these images, we play a certain role in which we always show ourselves to be happy, free, fun-loving, etc., but under the assumption that everybody knows that not everything is quite so rosy), or more like hypocrites (by trying to show ourselves in a way that is unlike who we actually are or how we actually live, attempting thus to cover up the fact there is some degree of performance or posing).[4] Whichever it is, the fact that there have been some bizarre cases of social media users making their own near-identical versions of other people's photographs[5] seems to prove that imitation really is the "sincerest form of flattery" (Bullen, 2016).

According to a significant part of psychoanalytic theory, acknowledging one's distance from the ideal, perceiving the idealised image's 'otherness', and being unable to maintain the satisfaction that

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for quitting Instagram, after having been the star of successful campaigns for brands such as L'Oréal and Nike.

4 I base this on the distinction suggested by Harry Berger in *Fictions of the Pose: Rembrandt Against the Italian Renaissance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. 2000, p. 18.

5 A particularly strange case (which some insist was a hoax) was that of the photographs shared on Instagram by Diana Alexa, in which she imitated, almost exactly, the travel photos taken by the successful Instagrammers Lauren Bullen (gypsea_lust) and Jack Morris (doyoutravel).

arises when closing, momentarily, the gap between the body and its ideal image, would almost inevitably be followed by the spectres of certain forms of physical disintegration (which, for Lacan, would be linked to an essentially fragmentable image of the body). The best example to explain this phenomenon would be the mythical figure of Narcissus (and it is no coincidence that, today, he is the most frequently cited myth when characterising contemporary technological individualism).

Robert Castel (1965/2003) noted that "Narcissus, leaning over his own image, is in mortal danger. Just one look from Orpheus is enough to banish Eurydice to the underworld. These myths express the possibility of being in danger within and because of the image itself" (p. 343). Even so, it is worth remembering that Narcissus did not seem to be aware that the image was that of his own reflected face. In any case, the most important thing for our argument here is that this mythical figure could not seize his own reflection in the water without his image being distorted, without the subsequent and inevitable disintegration of his reflection/body. As such, idealisation is always implicated in any given process which starts off with the aspiration for perfection and ends up in physical breakdown and aggression, the shift "from self-idealization to self-disgust" (Silverman, 1996, p. 68) - we can never avoid the ambivalent relationship between self-love and self-loathing.

L'amour-propre, the love of oneself, upon which Rousseau reflected so insightfully, is usually over-reliant on other people's opinions, forcing us to constantly try to appear attractive to others. This situation is intensified today to extreme levels, and it becomes increasingly arduous to stand by what we like, if what we like is not really appreciated by others.

Our desire to eliminate the distance that separates us from the ideal seems to be eternal. Thus, to compensate for this, we are forced to carry out constant exercises in self-promotion (ultimately, all narcissistic behaviour is about trying to capture other people's attention).

We can never match up to the ideal in a way that is sufficiently satisfactory, and so the chasm that separates us from it is full of anguish, and any attempts to *alleviate* this pain are often channelled into consumerist practices (it has even been claimed that some social networks target their advertising more aggressively at those who are detected as being in a state of distress or depression), or into the kind of therapy focused on self-control and getting to know oneself. These are always driven by logics that seek to convince us that we are ultimately responsible for everything that happens to us.

2. We Are Looked-at Beings

In this age of the selfie, of the endless proliferation of visual self-representations, it is again decidedly important to consider the issue of the gaze, what it means to look and be looked at, to *display ourselves*, this staging of 'the self' - and all of its inherent risks and murkiness.

Traditionally, we have been told that all gazes, all looks, are objectifying, that they exert power, that they turn the observed into an object, subjugating it. Today, however, it might also work the other way round, which is perhaps becoming more and more prevalent: it seems, within the Internet space, that one becomes an object when looking, and looking at all those enticing, perfect individuals who present themselves as being so free and admirable is what ends up turning us, their followers, into objects.

Vandier (1944) noted that in Ancient Egyptian mythology, the origin of humanity came down to a simple play on words between 'tears' (having fallen from the eye of the master of the universe) and 'men': "The eye sheds tears (rémyt), from which men are born (rémet)" (p. 40). Giorgio de Chirico (1918/1968) also insisted on a vision-based genealogy of all beings, reminding us that "even the fetus of a man, a fish, a chicken, a snake in its first stage is exactly an eye", encouraging us thus, in a very Hegelian way, to "find the

eye in every thing" (p. 447). But inevitably, in the end, a principle of interaction always comes into play, as clearly alluded to in a well-known assertion by Scheler: "I see not only the eyes of an other, I see also that he looks at me" (as cited in Derrida, 1967/1978, p. 98). Similarly, Sartre (1943/1953) stated that "it is never when eyes are looking at you that you can find them beautiful or ugly, that you can remark on their color. The Other's look hides his eyes; he seems to go in front of them" (p. 258).

There are, of course, a great many reasons why Sartre's phenomenology of looking, developed in *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1953), should be revisited today, again and again. He reiterates that 'to be' is 'to be seen', ever subject to *le regard*, the gaze or the look, in which the experience of the human condition is to be "thrown in the arena beneath millions of looks" (p. 281). We therefore need external mediation to be who we are; we are looked-at in a world which is looked-at. The gaze could thus only be understood by the subject as "the upsurge of an ekstatic relation of being" (p. 260). This position, we must not forget, would end up being adopted almost in its entirety by Lacan (1975/1988), for whom the "human object" is also, above all, "an object which is looking at me" (p. 215).

Sartre explained the consciousness of the looked-at being, in vision, by describing a figure furtively looking through a keyhole, engrossed in the act of seeing. But when this figure hears footsteps approaching, he is forced to become conscious of himself as a *spectacle*, to realise that he exists for the other, that he is in their field of vision. This scene is useful for Sartre to show how each one of us is always a "being-in-the-midst-of-the-world-for-others" (1943/1953, p. 266). It strikes me that the associations we could make between that eye in the keyhole[6] and our connected digital devices' screens could be, metaphorically speaking, very fruitful.

The fact is that, as opposed to the Cartesian *cogito* and all that entails, Sartre (1943/1953) emphasised a certain being-for-others, that we exist *for others*: "Being-for-others is a constant fact of my human

[6] For the *keyhole analogy*, see Sartre (1943/1953), p. 259.

reality, and I grasp it with its factual necessity in every thought, however slight, which I form concerning myself" (p. 280). Therefore, having consciousness would require a kind of externalisation, insomuch that we become an object for the other: "I am for myself only as I am a pure reference to the Other" (p. 260). The gaze is thus established as a necessary condition for our objectivity, since our fellow being, the onlooking other, is who *shows* us what we are: "I see myself because somebody sees me" (p. 260).

But the phenomenon of the gaze should not exclusively be understood in terms of an interaction between eyes and bodies. As Lacan (1975/1988) noted: "The gaze is not necessarily the face of our fellow being, it could just as easily be the window behind which we assume he is lying in wait for us" (p. 220). This is evident, since we can also feel watched by someone whose eyes we cannot see - it is almost impossible to imagine ourselves not under constant observation, and we assume that there is always somebody watching us, or at least able to watch us. This is the conversion of the gaze into a *probable* gaze (Sartre, 1943/1953), which explains why the individual believes they are constantly being looked at. That is, being looked at is not necessarily linked with an external body, and this leads us to a key statement for understanding Sartre's theory on the gaze: "[. . .] it is never eyes which look at us; it is the Other-as-subject" (p. 277).

The result of all this is that we accept an imaginary omnipresence of the onlooking other, and so we have to constantly *experience* our being-for-others. The gaze of our fellow beings becomes a kind of *pure* subject (in the sense that it can see without being seen) and which, in reality, we are unable to know, because we cannot 'situate' it as an object (as Sartre noted, this pure subject is "always there out of reach and without distance" p. 270).

The ideas put forward in *Being and Nothingness* move away from a notion of the gaze as a moment of a specific experience, bringing together all human presence (that is, the different modes of existence of the human being in the world) under this one concept of the *pure* or infinite subject. Extrapolating, it was almost inevitable that this

would culminate (as seen in the book) in the idea of an omnipresent and infinite subject, i.e. in the idea of an all-seeing God. This is very different, however, to Lacan's approach to this issue, for whom such a gaze does not come from a *pure* subject, rejecting thus Sartre's anthropomorphism, and instead proposing a direct link between the gaze and light. Therefore, he does not use the metaphors of God or a master, but rather that of the photographic camera.

Beyond these nuances and subtle differences, which are nevertheless greatly significant, Sartre's phenomenology ultimately situates us under the effect of a gaze or an 'illumination' which we could call *cultural*, an omnipresent, all-seeing gaze, which does not come about exclusively in plural form, and nor as a single unit, but which always identifies us as beings who are 'for the other'. Even if we are not always being looked at by others, we would always be under the effects of this situation. And though it would be interesting to compare this gaze with that of the mother or father holding onto their baby, while the baby, in turn, contemplates their own reflection, as in Lacan's description of the mirror stage,[7] this gaze, however, cannot be singularised: it "definitely does not belong to the world", Sartre claimed (1943/1953, p. 272).

There is always a convergence between cultural values and the ideal *Ich* (the ego, the self), and this is the basis of the hegemonic and normative representations that most of the many millions of self-representations shared online every day are trying to emulate.

Throughout our lives, a repertoire of images, of *ideal* representational coordinates that inhabit our minds just like language itself, have been embedded within us. The forms of

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[7] As Kaja Silverman (1996) notes, "when we attempt to understand the mirror stage we so often imagine the mother present, not merely holding the child up to its reflection, but facilitating the imaginary alignment of the child with the reflection. In such an elaboration of this specular drama, the mother's look stands in for what no look can actually approximate: the gaze. It superimposes the structuring reflection upon the child, and so makes possible the child's identification with what it can never 'be'" (p. 18).

looking that are brought about by this cumulation of images, forms which we could call the 'cultural gaze', are a key element in all identification processes. We feel strongly conditioned by how such a gaze perceives us. This gaze comes before the subject, just like language, and it equips us with the necessary tools for assigning meaning and making assessments, so crucial for our successful socialisation, and it endorses, or not, our identifications. Our ever-precarious approximation to the ideal, our own adoption of some of its images, is motivated and must be approved by this cultural gaze. Our identity depends, therefore, on culturally-constructed forms, on forms which have become hegemonic. They are normative ideals that come from symbolic matrices, and whose values we generally adapt to without fuss. Today, we see them affirmed, again and again, in the millions of 'likes' and adulatory comments garnered by the images of the biggest Internet celebrities.

The dominant gaze corroborates the image-version of ourselves, and the critique of these forms of corroboration has been manifested in many different ways. Feminist theory, for example, highlights the fact that the weight of this cultural gaze, and its effects, always falls most heavily upon women, who are subjected to the condition of the *image-being* far more intensely than men ever are.

This cultural gaze is hard to pin down. However, its effects are today ever more clear and quantifiable in the way it manifests as an expression of value on social media - it has the power to endorse or reject us, depending on whether we feel satisfactorily *seen* by it. It could be described, metaphorically, as a screen (in the Lacanian sense) but perhaps also as a projection system. We could imagine it as a spotlight, a complex construct that emits great bursts of stereotypical images. It is fuelled by the force of the whole set of representations that the culture has generated and pushed to the fore throughout our lives, a set which gives a visual form to differences in race, gender, etc. A projection system that modifies how we see reality, ensuring that certain bodies, by shining the spotlight onto them, are feted as the ideal norm, designated thus as objects to be

appreciated, while other bodies are excluded from this norm - they are hidden away or distorted, in accordance with certain identifying elements. This is how the cultural gaze becomes embedded within a given social context, as the space of projected light and shade, or of deforming, superimposed images.

The cultural gaze is not, thus, a passive or simply exemplifying gaze. Instead, it can project itself upon us, superimposing its light and images onto bodies, gestures and attitudes, highlighting some of them while casting others into darkness. It projects, onto the *stage* of our lives, the conditions that dictate who or what is welcome there, and the corresponding forms of hierarchy and exclusion.

The power of this cultural gaze can be largely ascribed to our destructive tendency to identify ourselves heteropathically, a tendency which, to a greater or lesser extent, seems to exist inside all of us. Even though the image superimposed on us by the dominant gaze can be harmful, the individual seems to have an innate propensity to participate, enthusiastically, in the interests of something which actually works against them, identifying with those images that make up the cultural ideal that so often despises us, and through which we end up reaffirming, sometimes passionately, the dominant values. In fact, marginalised people often share the same idealising opinions as those in power – we have a strong proclivity to put ourselves in the position of the dominating gaze, that point where (and following Lacan's proposed similarity between the cultural gaze and the camera) it 'photographs' us, or rather, as we would say, it *illuminates* us.

3. Reacting to the Gaze

The effects of the gaze on the person being looked at, and the phenomenology of the other's perception, all comprise another key aspect of Sartre's theorisation of the gaze. This aspect would in fact be highlighted by Lacan in his reading of the second part of Sartre's

Being and Nothingness, and he claimed to have found in this text "the entire phenomenology of shame, of modesty, of prestige, of the specific fear engendered by the gaze" (Lacan, 1975/1988, p. 215). For Sartre, essentially, shame, fear and pride are the primary reactions of anybody who is being looked at.

To be offered up to our fellow beings for their evaluation, to become the object of possible praise or contempt, is what defines being looked at. This being-in-vision, under somebody's gaze, also comes with the feeling that we have no control over the 'situation' (which leads to that sense of shame). It is the acknowledgment that we are *that thing* which is to be judged by the other, and, in some way, that we find ourselves in a certain state of *slavery* in this scenario, being the object of appraisals that qualify us, but, more than anything, degrade us.

The issue of shame here, as an initial reaction to the gaze of others, is crucially important, since it situates the objectivity of the self not in the comforting territory of knowledge, but rather in the state of unease caused by the being-for-others operated by the gaze.

In fact, the best way of understanding our 'being-looked-at' is the Sartrean idea of shame and the resulting anguish. Shame is a fundamental emotion, that of having our being *externalised*, ever dependent on the other, requiring other people's intervention so that we can be what we are. The gaze turns us into objects, it leaves us defenceless; we feel shame when we are forced to be for others, when we feel criticised, judged, insufficient.

In our times, however, our exposure to the gaze of others has been amplified in the virtual sphere, when we display ourselves to others, out of vanity, in the thousands of images that we ourselves carefully take and select. Thus, it would seem that this kind of shame has evaporated away amid the heat of immodesty and arrogance about being a certain way in others' eyes. But let us not get carried away: shame and vanity are by no means opposite feelings, since they are closely-linked reactions to the gaze of others, and they are always associated with forms of compliance, submission, and conforming

subordination. In fact, we can find, in *Being and Nothingness,* a revealing association between pride, on the one hand, and a certain kind of resignation: "in order to be proud of *being that,* I must of necessity first resign myself to *being only that*" (Sartre, 1943/1953, p. 290).

4. Can the dominant gaze be changed?

It has often been said that our ideas envelope our perceptions,[8] that we perceive things according to what we already know about them. Certainly, perception is fundamentally contextual and linguistic, and vision is not only a question of optical-chemical processes - language, images and theories also play a role. We could mention, for example, Norwood R. Hanson's questioning of the apparent distinction between theory and observation, as seen in his claim that even scientific observation is theoretically loaded[9] and from which it can be inferred that interpretation is *already* within vision, or even that interpretation *is* vision. Whatever it is that we see, Wittgenstein would say, this 'something' could be different to what it actually is. Seeing is not a passive, purely receptive act – instead, it is always the organisation of what is within its scope, and upon which complex forms of ordering are always operating.

The way we see, and are seen, depends on multiple factors, and so it can also be transformed in different ways. The dominant working modes of a given culture's scopic system can be altered; it is possible to come up with other ways of looking, different to those imposed by the hegemonic gaze, and unlike its usual forms of idealness, which simplify and reify.

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8 See William Whewell, 'The Philosophy of the Inductive Sciences', *The Historical and Philosophical Works of William Whewell,* vol. VI, London, Frank Cass & Co., 1967, p. 36.

9 See Matthew D. Lund, *Norwood R. Hanson, Observation, Discovery and Scientific Change*. New York: Humanity Books. 2010, p. 195.

The expectations and level of acceptance of what is put *on display* are profoundly internalised within us, and this greatly conditions what we really see. Seeing is, in most cases, searching the world for those images which most easily adapt to this gaze. And yet, it is also a case of squeezing reality into predetermined visual moulds, like when tourists seek out the typical monument-photo that they have seen copied again and again, only this time they actually want to be in it.

The possibility of changing the aforementioned projecting-illuminating device, i.e. the cultural, hegemonic gaze, all depends on our ability to alter the set of normative representations and images with which the discriminatory forms of difference are inscribed.

Liberating our gaze from the culturally imposed one (which tries to force everything into the limits of its own projection, made up of the predominant representations and values), and fleeing from its designations and determinations, essentially means creating, inventing ways to be free.

The question has been put forward, on several occasions, of whether it would be possible, as a strategy for political action, to reject all forms of idealisation. However, most psychoanalytical schools of thought have defended idealisation as a necessary psychic function that we cannot be without. But if it is not possible to live without idealisation, then we need, at least, to learn how to idealise in a different way. This approach has in fact been boosted today amid the spread of social networking, enacted by thousands of people who form online communities based around certain affinities, interests and life practices, and who generate, by sharing images, brand new forms of idealness which are very different to (and even challenge) the reductive, dominant forms. The uninhibited, joyous display, on the Internet, of bodies and ways of being and living that do not match the norm, is one such counter-strategy of idealisation. The celebration of diversity, and its being communicated in images brimming with positivity, confidence and enjoyment, might be the only way to make others learn how to *embrace* diversity, instead of just tolerating it.

The traditional forms of idealisation, based on the dominant imaginaries, seem to operate under the motto of 'you could be like that' – however, in reality, they just promote the constricting imperatives of 'you should be like that'. To resist this, it is essential to try out new identifications, ever open and adaptable, that never impose limits. This approach, it must not be forgotten, has been, since at least the early 1970s, one of the key methods used in the work of many artists who engage with the issue of identity itself, those who explore new forms of idealisation that go against the impositions of the cultural gaze. In fact, the potential role of artistic practice in this endeavour, providing illuminating poeticisations about seeing and been seen, always offers relevant lessons as to how this gaze could be modified.

As I mentioned above, this cultural gaze, whose power of projection led us to compare it, a few pages back, with a lighting device, has also been described metaphorically as a screen between the retina and the world: "a screen of signs, a screen consisting of all the multiple discourses on vision built into the social arena" (Bryson, 1988, p. 92). And if, this time, we start with the Lacanian figure of a blocking and distorting element, what we should expect from the most ambitious and non-conforming visual manifestations would be for them to design strategies that seek to turn off certain parts of this screen's lighting, while intensifying others, somehow changing the density of this screen's imaginary weft/warp structure with which it filters out and discards. Ultimately, the aim would be to drain the overpowering force from its forms of idealness and the corresponding processes of identification. The phenomenon of identification can never be separated from the processes of idealisation, agents of the *transformation* that is produced when the subject assumes an image, when the instance of the self is placed within a fictional narrative. In the identifying process, there is always mimesis, heteromorphic projection, derealisation.

When we idealise something, this is because there has been a previous process of identification with that something. As such,

all ideal forms of the image are, to some extent, linked with the mirrored image.[10] And this is crucial when trying to understand, for example, the phenomenon of certain influencers having millions of followers on social media.

And if the industries of subjectivity usually operate by means of identification, as an ideological apparatus, it would seem reasonable that a favourable approach for critical action is to think how best to break with certain processes of identification, how to try and inhibit them or, at least, hinder them.

In terms of artistic work, one of the most laudable attempts to critically investigate these identity-based processes was that carried out by Brecht, with his aim to create theatre outside of the *imaginary*. It was the first of many subsequent attempts to suspend the usual games of identification that lie at the heart of artistic manifestations. This would include refusing to allow the spectator to identify with the character, or the actor with the role (the actor would instead become more like an observer of the character they are playing), as well as trying out distinctly anti-illusionist techniques, located not within fiction, but within the consciousness of an ever-conflictive reality (and which we have seen in some so-called 'happenings', artistic actions, performances, 'relational' approaches or an infinite number of markedly 'artivist' proposals). It is as if critically thinking or poeticising is, ultimately, the exact opposite of letting oneself get caught up in the mechanisms of identification.

The relevance of Brecht's proposal explains why, ever since, there has been such a vast proliferation of attempts to keep at a distance the dissolving point of reality that is located in the sphere of representation. This works under the widespread assumption that representation should always be subjected to a kind of constant

[10] Freud notes this, very clearly: "What he projects before him as his ideal is the substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood in which he was his own ideal". 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' [1914]. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology, and Other Works*. London: Hogarth Press. 1964, p. 93.

parabasis, and so this approach is an antidote to the processes of identification.

Even so, if identification is always a necessary process for the formation of subjectivity, it might perhaps be useful not to focus on how to prevent it, but rather on how to explore its potential for change, both in its strictly psychic dimension, and its social side, the hypothesis being that there is no reason why identification should always have to buckle to the demands of the dominant forms of the gaze. In this sense, the proliferation of the aforementioned alternative forms on social media, which go against the ideal ones, and which are brimming with positivity and satisfaction, even pleasure, could help modify the parameters of what kinds of bodies and lifestyles are deemed desirable by most, allowing thus for more flexibility. These proposals, in short, would defend the central role of the imaginary register in all aspects of life, as well as the pointless attempts at reducing it all to the field of rationality and consciousness.

But let us now try to point out a second line of thought with regards to the determinations imposed by the cultural gaze. And let us do so, precisely, by using, as a metaphor, a fundamental image in the history of art, one used by Lacan as the basis for the argument he sets out in the text 'Anamorphosis' (1964): *The Ambassadors*, painted by Holbein in 1533.

In his discussion of this painting, Lacan associated the expression "geometral point" with the point of view of the central, conical perspective, where the eye is situated, and in relation to which all the elements in the scene are ordered in terms of space, as if what is seen is somehow *projected* or subjected by the observer's eye. This is the central point of view, and also the basic vanishing point, which coincides with what was determined by the principles of Carthesian subjectivity. This point serves, furthermore, as the perfect metaphor for vision as a device for control, as the place for the cultural gaze, governing the given-to-be-seen, the displayed.

The anamorphically-painted skull at the bottom of the painting indicates, however, a 'blind' spot, forcing us to shift ourselves, to

move away from that ever-comfortable, all-encompassing and always satisfying geometral point, to be able to see something *different*.

Anybody who has seen this painting in the National Gallery, in London, knows that in order for the image of this skull to be reconstructed before our eyes, we must move towards the edge of the painting – we have to abandon the central gaze, and place ourselves at a different viewpoint, a lateral one, almost in line with the surface of the painting, very much *diverted* away from the geometral point. Drastically reducing our field of vision in this way, as demanded by the blind sport created by this strange object, forces us to leave the centre of the field of vision, to uptake a radical change in perspective. But the moment we place ourselves there, it turns out that we become entities looked at by others, by those who are still using the *normal* gaze, in front of the painting, there in the room where the painting hangs. We could use Holbein's skull as an example of the fact that, before being the *owners* of a viewpoint, of a place of vision, we find ourselves subjected to the cultural gaze (represented here by the spectators situated in front of the painting), and that our displacement in front of the painting, driven by our desire to see it *all*, correlates with us moving *into view*, being positioned within the 'frame', forming part of that scene dominated by the *hegemonic* gaze. And this place, this position there on the corner, watched over by the gazes of others, suspended in our insatiable hunger to see *more*, is essentially the place that we occupy in our lives.

The importance of placing ourselves under the gaze of others, as the payoff for our desperation to see, is reflected in the infinite number of thematisations and allegories of this situation throughout the history of contemporary art. This was achieved particularly successfully in Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946 – 1966), the paradigmatic example of putting oneself *in the scene* by the very act of looking. This work focuses on a situation similar to that of the voyeur as described by Sartre, i.e. somebody who suddenly realises they are being watched, right when, as Krauss (1993) would note, the

libidinal, desiring gaze gains awareness of itself due to the presence of the overbearing, judgmental *cultural* gaze.

It must not be forgotten, however, that some of the psychoanalytical readings of visual interaction, as suggested by Sartre and thematised here by Duchamp, such as that of René Held in his *Psychopathologie du regard* (1952), would note a certain castration anxiety in all of this, even masochistic fantasies not unlike "the magical theory behind the primitive belief in the evil eye" (Jay, 1993, p. 277). But aside from these controversies, and Duchamp, the thematisation of looking whilst at the same time being *under* the gaze has become an important line of action in contemporary art, based on strategies of masquerading. This is particularly important within the feminist critique of the dominant forms of looking and being looked at, and their role in the construction of 'ideal' femininity. These creative approaches play around with the awareness of being seen, ironically subjecting oneself to the hegemonic gaze, obeying what is expected to be displayed, accepting in a hyper-conformist way or pre-empting the configuration that this gaze tries to project. Some recent performances on social media that are based on first-person fiction (by Amalia Ulman, Laís Pontes, etc.), for example, take this approach, to great success. It is an ever-ironic and generally humorous strategy, which, by means of a kind of self-gazing but based on the formalisation imposed by others' eyes, implies seeing the one who sees, as well as *seeing oneself being seen*, which is always a reference, ultimately, to the *dominant* gaze.

On social media, the spectre of an absolute, all-seeing being, which sees us without being seen, becomes something completely literal. To meet its gaze would mean, in a certain sense, to 'foresee' it, to anticipate it, to pose in expectation, to stick far too closely to the projections that we are expected to comply with, to deliberately display ourselves as a non-self, a conscious fiction which is, therefore, rebellious. This kind of ironic objectification, this hyper-conformist reductionism under the watchful eye of the objectifying gaze, allowing ourselves to be *produced*, far too easily, by the cultural

gaze, plays around with the idea of ironically acknowledging our being an object-for-the-gaze as something more real than our being an object-for-ourselves. But also, ultimately, it would mean exposing the dominating gaze itself, that kind of absolute subject which is hard to keep under wraps amid this kind of *fatal* ironic behaviour.

Let us return to Holbein's painting, as mentioned above, to put forward a specific reading of it (distancing ourselves, again, from Lacan's comments on it). We can also use this enigmatic painting to offer a different perspective in terms of the games of looking that it seems to invite us to play. At the most basic level, Holbein demands, of us, two kinds of gaze when contemplating this painting: a 'normal' one, from the geometral point, and another anamorphic, active one, which refers to an object of vision that resists or opposes the former one. The latter corresponds to seeing in *another* way, a *different* gaze which, in reality, can reveal images hidden upon something far more important than what appears to be a double portrait. In fact, the image hidden by anamorphosis here is not an image of something dead, of something in particular, but rather something universal, i.e. mortality itself. A representation that is not immediately *obvious*, but rather, as with ideas, resists, given its anamorphic disposition, being simplified as a mere image. Perhaps this 'cut' can be understood as a need for otherness, as a breakdown in the codification itself of the gaze imposed by the dominant gaze. This one, the central gaze, sees *hardly anything*, it is pure codification: the authentic truth is hidden in an image that requires a *different* point of view, a *different* gaze (which, furthermore, not only *sees* or receives the image, but also reconstructs it, as happens in all perspectives like this when the eye is placed in the right spot).

All of this might back up our claim that, precisely, this is one of the fundamental missions of art and one of the more critical manifestations within the field of the visual: that of demanding the gaze to be displaced, diverted, a gaze which sees more, and which uncovers, a gaze that is active, image-making and not simply image-receiving, and which is reluctant or simply unable to endorse the

established visual orders and codes that dictate what we ourselves should be as an image. Ultimately, this is a concept of art not so much in the sense of showing something *different*, but rather, above all, the demand for a *different* kind of looking.[11]

Finally, I would like to mention, albeit briefly and as a way of rounding up this section, what might be considered another possible line of reflection regarding all the aspects dealt with here – I refer, fundamentally, to the camera itself as an image-making device.

I mentioned above that, in Lacan, the cultural gaze was not materialised in the form of a metaphor for God or the master, but

[11] We must mention here the proposal defended by Kaja Silverman, who starts by considering the two looks, or gazes, as noted by Barthes with relation to observing photography: the *studium* and the *punctum*. In this approach, *studium* corresponds to the codified gaze which is linked to normative representation, the position indicated by the geometral point in Lacan's first diagram, i.e. what is given-to-be-seen (Kaja Silverman, 1996, pp. 181-182). Meanwhile, the *punctum* is, for Silverman, the more unruly gaze which challenges the established forms of seeing, associated with "the movement of the desiring look beyond the 'frame' or 'picture' of the given-to-be-seen, toward what lies 'outside'." This "wound" or "prick" which destabilises the standardised gaze would thus be the creation of an unexpected point of view, in which marginal elements might acquire huge importance in relation to those which are supposedly more important. But the most interesting (and perhaps questionable) aspect of Silverman's interpretation is that this transformative capacity of vision depends on memory. That is, the ability of artistic practices to shift us in relation to the form of seeing imposed by what Silverman calls the "dominant fiction", to invite us to see in a *different* way. This is linked to the supposed ability to "implant" synthetic memories in the observer, memories which she describes as "libidinally saturated associative clusters which act like those mnemic elements which, as a result of a psychic working over, have been made the vehicles for the expression of unconscious wishes" (p. 185). Therefore, art's transformative capacity is based on its power to operate with "forms of mental activity in which the pleasure principle predominates, and in which desire is given lavish expression" (ibid.), making use of more "primarized" forms of mental activity than those which we tend to use, thanks to the inherent diversity and richness of metaphor.

rather in the figure of the camera, as well as in a certain form of 'illumination'. The relation between the photographic camera and the defining features of the cultural gaze are, in fact, manifold, and the history of their mutual coincidence and influence are of great interest. Photography and the dominant forms of seeing have, over time, been constructed and deconstructed mutually.

The camera's abilities, as an optical instrument for changing and revitalising our worn-out, routine perception of things, are immense. Anybody can become a photographer now, which in turn opens up, every day, infinite possibilities for new forms of seeing the world and the many thousands of things that have barely been seen within it. Despite this, we must recognise that devices for visual documenting, in their widespread, habitual use in the context of social media, tend to help standardise the gaze, more intensely, as opposed to diversifying it. The massive proliferation of these devices is generally geared towards repeating and imitating those forms of representation that are typical of professional image creation and, more specifically, of the agents who produce the usual or predominant visual formalisations of the consumer culture. What almost everybody aims for is a kind of photography that is in keeping with what has already been seen and admired, to stuff their reality into certain visual moulds that they know will be worthy of applause, and so are ideal to be used for their *online* social presence. The ubiquitous photographic devices help us display ourselves, feeding our constant need for recognition and approval.

But, as noted above, it would be ridiculous not to acknowledge the huge critical potential inherent to photography in terms of its capacity for generating diversity when displaying individuals and things. We should not forget that each photographic act today is, almost always, one of identifying what has been photographed, i.e. declaring to the world: 'it's like this', 'I'm like this'.

When the first cameras appeared, the fine arts were quick to distance themselves from this new device's perfectly-executed forms of representing the world. Painters desperately sought to escape

from the camera's objectifying formalisations, resolutely defending the physical qualities of painting, or its more imaginative modes of expression, and defending the forms of idealisation and transformation which were not to be found in the detailed objectivity of the camera. In short, the practice of painting was forced to act against that which could be executed better by photographic technology.

Before long, however, the camera was shown to be an instrument that let things be seen in a way they had never been seen before. And we owe a debt to Benjamin (1935/1998) in this regard, for his theories on how the new image-making devices might expand our perception, bringing to the fore certain aspects of things that only a lens can see, generating images "which escape natural vision" (p. 283).

As a "mechanical eye", Vertov stated, the cinematic camera could show us the world in a way that only cameras can see it, opening up, for us, the path towards "the creation of a new perception of the world" (as cited in Barnouw, 1993, p. 58) making it possible for a hitherto-unknown universe to be revealed. This has to be a constant endeavour – exploring how the new devices that capture and process images might offer us new ways to visually experience our surroundings, and broaden out our skills of perception, should never end. Ultimately, this could be interpreted as questioning the rigid ways in which we understand 'reality' in its adjustment to the hegemonic gaze, by opening them up and diversifying them. These ways are almost always based on the standardisation in the modes of perception and the patterns of repetition and imitation as seen in certain *styles* or habits of looking.

The camera, as Flusser claimed, is like Lacan's screen: it makes us see things through a visor, which not only freezes things, but also puts them in order, according to a program. However, the camera can also be a medium that actively deconstructs the cultural gaze's most impoverishing and limiting ways and modes of fixation, and therefore it can deconstruct this gaze's supremacy too. The camera is very good at shaking up the gaze that is most dependent on the hegemonic standards of idealness.

This debate, in any case, rages on: it lies at the centre of the discussion around the possibility, or otherwise, of continuing to defend the positivity that ran through Benjamin's texts, in terms of the new visual technologies, or whether these developments, beyond just expanding our senses, might instead lead us to a form of 'anaesthesia' (Buck-Morss, 1992). In fact, the scene in Farocki's *Bilder der Welt* (1988), in which we see an aerial bombardment of a city, is still highly revealing with regards to the ambivalent character of the camera as a technical eye, most notably when the voiceover states: "The preserving photograph, the destroying bomb - these two now press together" (as cited in Silverman, 1996, p. 151).

5. Placing ourselves in front of the camera

Bourdieu (1965/1990) wrote that "striking a pose means respecting oneself and demanding respect" (p. 80). Today, however, not only is everything photographed all the time, but also the photographic act happens in any given way, in any given circumstances, and so the old rituals of preparing for a photo are reduced to a minimum, as defined by the instantaneity of the digital *snapshot*. Our new image-making devices tend not to give us time 'for' the photograph – the idea is that we hardly prepare our bodies for a shot. The photographic act continuously interrupts our daily lives with no prior warning, which makes us respond with our bodies, almost automatically, via gestures and expressions that, having been practiced a thousand times, and with nowhere near the level of respect that being in front of the camera used to require, we use as a way of showing ourselves ever in a good mood, beaming with joy.

Posing is part of the history of 'postural coercions', the ways in which the body has been educated and indoctrinated in relation to the gaze. In other words, the history of how the body is to be prepared for other people, how it should be configured when presented to others. All of this is very much connected to the political anatomy

noted by Foucault, and he gave the example of the peasant who would become a soldier, reminding us that, since the mid-18th century, the military orders[12] would demand that future soldiers had to get used to "holding their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders" (as cited in Foucault, 1975/1995, p. 135). Furthermore, this ordinance added that "a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has 'got rid of the peasant' and given him 'the air of a soldier'" (ibid.).

The history of this kind of postural modelling is a long and fascinating one. A key text in this regard is *Il Cortegiano* by Baltasar Castiglione, a genuine treaty on how to *present oneself* to others, who in turn always look on in a rigorously judgmental and censorial way. Faces and bodies should become "signs of the perfect mental and psychic grace" (Berger, 2000, p. 102) which, for Castiglione (1528/1901) would make one "at first sight pleasing and agreeable to all who see him" (p. 23).

But the history of posing is what interests us most here, i.e. what to do with ourselves so we are ready to be represented. This is a history, above all, of a critique of posing itself, and, ultimately, a history of the conflict between artifice and spontaneity. We can refer, for example, to what Diderot said in 1766, regarding the years spent on life drawing in the Academy, a time in which, in his opinion, artists acquired a certain *mannerism* in their drawing:

> all these academic positions, affected, constrained, artificial, as they are; all these actions coldly and awkwardly expressed by some poor devil, and always the same poor devil, hired to come three times a week, to undress himself, and to play the puppet in the hands of the professor—what have these in common with the positions and actions of nature? (Diderot, as cited by Morley, 1905, p. 74)

[12] Ordinance of 20th March 1764.

For Diderot, the truthfulness of nature was what formed the basis of art's credibility. Even so, it is worth highlighting, to avoid misunderstandings, that the opposite of forced and artificial, of the affected stillness typical of the mannequin's pose, is not an entirely fleeting pose either: "A portrait may appear sad, somber, melancholic, and serene since these are permanent states; however a portrait which laughs lacks nobility, characterless, perhaps even false and consequently a joke" (Diderot, 1766/2011, p. 103). He continues: "The laugh is fleeting. One laughs on occasion; but one is not in a state of laughter" (ibid.). It is somewhat striking that Diderot concurs with Lessing in this regard, who, in his *Laocoon*, published in the same year, stated that "art [. . .] must not express anything, of which we can only think as transitory" (Lessing, 1766/1853, p. 17), using the example of a portrait of Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751), who had allowed himself to be painted while laughing, but whose face "laughs only the first time we look at him" (p. 18).

Much later, there was another interesting chapter in this critique of the forced formalisation of the pose. I refer to the observations put forward by Proudhon in his text *On the Principle of Art and Its Social Purpose*: "See all our paintings of mythology, of religion, of history, of battles, of genre: not a single natural figure; they are all contorted, disrupted, or dressed like charlatans" (1865/1989, p. 296). Furthermore, and of greater relevance to us here, he would apply this same critique to the practice of photography: "Even in their photographs, our contemporary celebrities pose. The same attitudes have become typical. Regardless of their clothes, we could recognise, from their gestures, their facial expressions, the warrior, the tribune, the priest, the magistrate, the worker" (p. 296). Indeed, looking at some *cartes de visite*, one of the most widely-used photographic formats after Disdéri patented it in 1854, shows the extreme standardisation in the poses of those depicted. Generally, these cards made use of props that resembled those of the painted portraits of royalty and aristocrats, with little variation among them. In the *carte de visite*, the subjects would often be standing, next to a column or

some kind of fabric, or, if seated, they would pretend to be reading or writing. This photographic format saw the start of the trend (which continues to flood social media today) in which celebrity photographs became collectable. Essentially, in the Second French Empire, it became fashionable to collect photos of politicians, actors, actresses, etc., people who, in many cases, had never before been seen by the collector. This market was developed by Disdéri in the 1850s and 60s, when he would sell each *Galerie des contemporains* in volumes of twenty-five pictures.

This imitating, in photographic studios, of the conventions of aristocratic portrait painting, led to many ironic commentaries about the incongruence between the subjects' own social standing and the representational conventions borrowed from aristocratic painting, since underprivileged people would be photographed with sumptuous backdrops and props (Wynter, 1862). But this was the transformative magic and the success of the photographic act: by only using refined, bourgeois poses, anybody could turn into a distinguished personality via photography, and studio photography would always seek to exploit and profit from this idealisation.

Nevertheless, and as opposed to the connection frequently made between posing and the artificiality of the image, striking a pose when we know that we are to be photographed, being able to face the camera in a way that we choose, and preparing ourselves to be gazed at by the mechanical eye, should all be understood as a defensive act, as an action that resists complete submission to the camera, as a way of preparing for our encounter with it (since posing always implies agreeing to be photographed in a particular way).

The fact that Barthes said he didn't like being photographed is not merely trivial. In his opinion, photography turns people into an image, an object. Photography meant, for him, "the advent of myself as other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity" (Barthes, 1980/1982, p. 12) which would only be resolved by generating the following, dramatic situation: "In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am,

the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art [. . .] a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter" (p. 13-14). There has always been a link between the photographic act and death, at least since Arthur Onslow's comments in 1858 regarding the indigenous people at King George Sound, Western Australia, who, he claimed, were afraid that being photographed would kill them.[13] A deadly effect of photography, paralysing, statuesque, as initiated just when striking a pose. As Owens (1992) noted, to pose is to freeze oneself to anticipate or mimic the stillness of the photograph that is to be taken.

It is said that Paul Strand used a fake camera to distract people whilst photographing them with a hidden camera.[14] Walker Evans also took many photographs hiding the camera from the subjects. The hidden camera would go on to be a resource used many years later with notable results, for example, by Philip-Lorca diCorcia, in his series *Heads* (2000-01).

Moving the camera out of sight of whoever is about to be photographed, so that the subject does not feel the pressure always exerted on us by the lens, is the simplest technique for those who want to capture a spontaneous representation, a less 'artificial' appearance. However, some reject the notion that posing is a denaturing formalisation of the represented individual: there are many photographers who believe that posing might be a means of reaching a greater 'truth'. Susan Sontag's anecdotes about the photographic work of Diane Arbus are good examples of this:

> Like Brassaï, Arbus wanted her subjects to be as fully conscious as possible, aware of the act in which they were participating. Instead

[13] See the entry 'Australia', written by Warwick Reeder, in John Hannavy (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Nineteenth-Century Photography*. New York: Routledge. 2008, p. 98.

[14] See Ellen Gamerman, 'The Fine Art of Spying'. *Wall Street Journal*, 12th September 2013.

> of trying to coax her subjects into a natural or typical position, they are encouraged to be awkward—that is, to pose. [. . .] Standing or sitting stiffly makes them seem like images of themselves (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 29)

For Arbus, it is not the spontaneous snapshot, but rather the constructed pose that captures the subject most authentically. The subject's revealing expression in fact shows what is strange, unusual or fake about the normal bodily posture. Using the pose as an artifact, as something constructed, but also as something chosen and which goes against the randomness of the instant snapshot, might be the best way of bringing about a higher degree of authenticity.[15]

Today, social media has given rise to a whole new repertoire of poses and gestures for the camera. Frowning and pouting at the same time (the so-called 'duckface'), subtly looking to the ground, or casually tilting the head, are some of the great many gestures that are repeated every day in thousands of selfies. However, apart from this control of our own gestures that these auto-photos allow, we are permanently subjected to being photographed multiple times, be it in family gatherings or get-togethers with friends. This is the issue of our co-existing with the omnipresent image-making devices, which demand that we are constantly on alert, ready to react to their invasive and continual gaze. It is still surprising to see just how fast people strike a pose, following plenty of daily practice, when they are summoned to be photographed – they can immediately adopt, without hesitation, the right posture and expression that they know

[15] Philippe Dubois claims, in relation to the photographic work of Diane Arbus, the following: "Instead of the hunted image, Arbus favours the convened, constructed image. Instead of spontaneity, posing. Instead of chance, willingness and choice. By means of the 'plastic' image of themselves that they hope to get across, and that the artist helps them produce, the 'truth' and 'authenticity' of Arbus's characters are revealed." [Translated from the Spanish: *El acto fotográfico*. Barcelona: Paidós. 1983, p. 40].

will best contribute to this memory, which must always be shared, of a joyous moment of fun.

How we display ourselves in front of the camera will continue to be a key question, as is how we react to these devices, and how they condition us. This is a central concern in current artistic creation, i.e. the question of posing, how we confront, with our bodies, our being visually documented. It continues a long line of exploration by countless artists who have looked into the boundaries between posing and acting. We should remember, for example, Valie Export's work on the act of posing and presenting oneself to the camera as a transgressive gesture, Cindy Sherman's playing around with simulated poses, Rineke Dijkstra's subtle use of posing as almost the sole rhetorical element in her work, among others.

Today, in a context of 'social' games online, of constant visual identification, many young artists channel these investigations into a wide range of online interventions, exploring, again, the possibilities offered by acting, pretending, farce, pantomime. This reactivates the idea of the self as a game between the actor and the script, in which photographic acts document a kind of performance. The mask is certainly used as a key element in many of these works, in this time when celebrities themselves construct their followers' aspirations by means of masks.

Perhaps, however, there still needs to be further work on new critical poetics about the issue of the 'great art' of the pose, at this time when social media influencers attract thousands of followers not so much for what they have done, but rather because they exist *beautifully*. Because today the 'truth', again, seems to be turning into a question of style, a new crisis of the subject similar to that which occurred in the late Victorian era, constructing identity, as Wilde would have it, upon ever-secondary signs that belong to the sphere of pure aestheticism based on personal image.

6. Between the cyber-*flâneur* and the digital *badaud*

The modern cliché of the city as *writing*, as a book read by those who walk its streets, walkers whose gaze is an act of *reading*, takes on new dimensions today in the recurring metaphor of the Internet as a digital city. It seems that what was said of 19th-century London can be applied to the Internet today: "a place of sudden events, unidentified people, bizarre coincidences, and unexpected intimacies" (Nord, 1995, p. 42). Similarly, the notions of the bazaar-city, the jungle-city, the organism-city and the machine-city, applied so often to the interpretation of the modern city (Langer, 1984) would also, in many possible senses, be applied to the Internet, understood as a city to be traversed and navigated.

The social networks are as fascinating to us as the window displays at London's Burlington Arcade were to the mid-19th century walkers. So much so, this location was once justifiably dubbed, in a play on words, 'Burlington Arcadia'.[16] The walkers, the passers-by, would stand and gawp, just as we do now when facing the digital window displays that are the 'news feeds' on our social media, where vying for our attention and gaze, as in the 19th-century displays, are a thousand miscellaneous things, and we "never tire by their monotony" (Smith, 1848, p. 5). Wandering around social networks, or losing oneself in the bustling crowds while walking the streets, is always pleasant and entertaining: "Any man [. . .] who is bored in the midst of the crowd, is a fool! A fool! and I despise him!", said Guys, in Baudelaire (1863/1972, p. 400).

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[16] As Charles Larcom Graves notes, Punch offered a detailed explanation of Burlington Arcade's attractions in 1842, under the heading 'The Haunts of the Regent Street Idler': "The covered passage through which the overland journey from Burlington Gardens to Piccadilly is generally performed [. . .] becomes a perfect Burlington Arcadia." *Mr. Punch's History of Modern England*. London, New York, Toronto and Melbourne: Cassell and Company. 1921, pp. 156-7.

It is tempting to use the descriptions of the experience of the modern city as a way of talking about the Internet user in this new 'Arcadia' of connectivity. As a way of seeing the network-city as the place where living in a state of anxiety has taken hold most intensely, and this, for Simmel, first came about in the constant barrage of images and impressions. Fortuitous and transitory interactions, ever fleeting, and perceptual shocks, all define this tumultuous power of the stimuli that come to us through the screen-city.

There are also many similarities that we could note between the window and the computer screen, the latter understood as that space where the world passes before our eyes, like the new window of the 'indoor *flâneur*' (Cuvardic, 2012, p. 30). But it also applies the other way round, as the window that opens onto the Internet-street, exposing us thus to other people's gazes, turning our home into one with no walls or façade.[17]

As with the fragmentary experience so typical of the modern city, the immense visual stimulation that we get from the screens of our tech devices often seems to have a certain anaesthetising, dulling effect (a form of self-protection, perhaps?). It is the new version of the *blasé* attitude, that kind of heady weariness in which everything ends up looking the same, in which nothing seems of greater worth than anything else. We are victims of the new digital melancholy, of the tedium caused by visual overstimulation, often accompanied by those foibles of wanting to be special, as noted by Simmel (and which inundate social networks today), expressed in wanting to stand out, wanting to be seen as different.

Every day we feel the pleasure of navigating around the network-city, that territory teeming with new things. It is reminiscent of the keenness to wander the streets, which Dickens loved to write about, or the 'willing nomadism' as lauded by Balzac, for whom to look around was to live. The issue of 'how we walk around' is

[17] It is particularly worth noting here the short text 'Windows' by Charles Baudelaire. English translation available in the collection *Paris Blues: The Poems in Prose* (2012). London: Anvil Press Poetry.

reconfigured, having now become something closer to 'how we navigate' or browse the Internet.

As is logical, there have been many attempts to take the older terms for those who would amble around the city, as used within mid-19th century *Costumbrismo*, and apply them to today's Internet users: the *flâneur*, the walker, the passer-by, the prowler, the snooper, the voyeur. An updating of these terms that perhaps takes us to a funny new version of *The Natural History of the Idler Upon Town* (Albert Smith's 1948 text), but now, of course, necessarily focused on the virtual city. There were countless different types, starting with the one suggested in the definition of *flaneur* (without an accent) that appeared in an 1808 dictionary: "a lazybones, a loafer, a man of insufferable idleness, who doesn't know where to carry his trouble and boredom" (as cited in Ferguson, 2015, p. 24) while a different definition suggested such a figure was "a thinking being" (Loubier, 2001, p. 165). In other words, and paraphrasing Huart, this is unlike the working man (who would look without seeing) or the man of leisure (who would see without looking): the *flâneur* was somebody who could look and see at the same time (Huart, 1841).

In the end, the 19th-century *flâneur* was identified more as a lover of movement, variety and the multitude, who could extract many valuable things from the act of observation, things which went unnoticed by everybody else. Thus, it has been said that the *flâneur* was a kind of *unwitting* philosopher, who was able to analyse, in depth, what was going on in the street. Paradoxically, sometimes just a quick glance (albeit full of intuition) was enough to do this. The *flâneur*'s gaze was interpretive, defamiliarising, actively exploratory, unlike the 'touristic' gaze, which is predetermined and subject to preconceptions of what has to be seen. This leads us to the old maxim of *flânerie*: "In our standardized and uniform world, it is right here, deep below the surface, that we must go. Estrangement and surprise, the most thrilling exoticism, are all close by" (Halévy, as cited by Benjamin, 1999, p. 444).

To think about the figure of the cyber-*flâneur* or the data-*flâneur* would mean having to combine Baudelaire's *flâneur* with that of the digital ethnographer, who has sharp observational skills, and for whom everything has at least some point of interest. Their gaze interprets at a certain distance, aware of the commodification of everything that passes before their eyes, even their own relationships with other people, being able as they are to interpret that which is, for others, everyday life or mere noise.

A gaze that is curious, inquisitive, oriented towards social investigation, always uncovering, was that of the earliest *flâneur*, as noted so beautifully by Fournel in *Ce qu'on voit dans les rues de Paris* (1867). As opposed to the hurried passer-by who has no time to be entertained by what they see, the 19th-century *flâneur* was devoted to the act of seeing. Similarly, the cyber-*flâneur* must be able to discern how fake the behaviour is and how fabricated the identities are in this age of digital hyper-exposure. They always aspire to decipher something, to gain uncommon knowledge of the digital city they are navigating, and so their movement should also be, more than anything, and as it was in the past, a source of creativity in itself.

When 'post-Internet' artists[18] today speak of art created under the effects of hours of online browsing, we are almost bound to be reminded of certain slogans, such as that of Degas: "Walk, then work."[19] Many of these new digital artists try, as did many artists in the late 19th century, to document this moving vision, based on the effect of hundreds of hours of navigating their way among the multitude, a multitude which is now 'connected'. Artists who work with digital remixing, and in particular the members of the so-called Internet surfing clubs, are the best examples, in the digital sphere, of such accumulators of impressions and strange objects,

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[18] See '¿Arte «post-Internet?', in Juan Martín Prada, *Prácticas artísticas e Internet en la época de las redes sociales*. Madrid: Akal [2nd edition], 2015 (in Spanish).

[19] This is his famous expression *"Ambulare, postea laborare."* See Marcel Guérin (ed.), *Lettres de Degas*. Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1931, p. 52.

'scavengers' or 'semionauts' who collect signs as they wander through the network city.

The media poet or artist, the digital ethnographer or micro-sociologist, and the digital *flâneur*, just like the 19th-century Parisian, all become spectators in an 'improvised theatre', gathering up visual impressions that can be interpreted in thousands of ways. They are figures who do not seek online 'spectacles' per se, but rather they prefer to see (and above all *display*) the Internet as a 'spectacle' in its own right. Cyber-*flânerie* would be, therefore, the attitude represented today, as it was in the past, by a certain challenging of what is imposed by the consumer culture, but specifically now, insomuch that this culture finds itself being articulated by digital connectivity. Their aim is to distance themselves from the merely seduced, sleepwalking, automatic and manipulated gaze of the average Internet user.

21st-century *flânerie* kicked off a new position for the gaze: it went from being panoramic, dominating from above, to being street-level, horizontal, mobile, from within the crowd, just like the Internet user's immersed state. The cyber-*flâneur* would thus have a multi-faceted identity: they flit between being the audience, the spectator, the reader, the interpreter, the evaluator, the protagonist, but always the navigator, the stationary wanderer, a traveller for whom the world is what moves, passing before their eyes.

Not participating in what was going on was one of the typical features of early *flânerie*. On the Internet, however, we are always impelled, tempted, to leave a comment, an opinion, some kind of impression. In this age of 'dataveillance', it is perhaps no longer possible to go completely unnoticed among the online multitude; an anonymous immersion in the crowd, a completely private *flânerie*, is perhaps not completely feasible anymore.

And if moving freely was so fundamental to the old *flâneur*, that is, their wandering the city with no set aims, then today, in these new streets that are the social network interfaces, maybe we prefer to adopt the role of that other great figure in the modern city, the

so-called 'sandwichman', i.e. the human advert, wearing a sandwich board. This figure tries, more than anything, to "call attention to himself, to be seen and read" (Hayes, 2002, p. 459) and just like him, we are resigned to being stuck in the mere handful of places where we can 'advertise ourselves'.

However, those who seem to have the biggest online presence today are somewhat like an updated version of the figure of the *badaud*, one who gapes, always walking around the modern city submerged in a state of acritical distraction, with a compulsive and consuming gaze, gobsmacked by the infinite number of visual stimuli in which they sought entertainment, ever in desperate need of something new. Compared to the cyber-*flâneur*, who would try to keep a certain reflective and critical distance, the new digital *badaud* is only really interested in relieving their own boredom, desperate to see what's going viral, needing to be constantly visually stimulated, and always interacting with others *like them* (and always on their same terms).

7. Bodies on screens

Looking at a photograph gives us information about a point of view, the location of an eye within space, the position from which the shot was taken, all of which we assume coincides with that of one of the photographer's pupils (we tend to forget that, with few exceptions, a photograph is the result of a one-eyed vision). However, with the digital image, which is often completely synthetic, this idea of positioning the eye when producing an image becomes almost totally diminished. This contrasts with the analogue photographic act which, as well as capturing the object by recording it on film, actually indicates the position of the photographer and their eye in relation to it. Thus, we would accept Tomas's observation that "there is no longer a point of view, but visual context" (1988, p. 66).

Also, the limits of the image, as well as the boundary between the image and the space where the observer is situated, soon fell into

crisis. In the new media, both of these are invariably annulled – this is achieved via the absolute changeability of image scales and sizes as offered by digital editing programmes, or via immersive practices (e.g. in virtual reality installations), or as a result of the practices for simultaneous ubiquity that the Internet makes possible.

Though the screens of our computers and phones display interactive images, they are also highly absorbent. Our solitude, in front of the screen, is related to a certain *incorporation* into it. This would explain the previous reluctance of some writers, namely those who were used to the typewriter, to embrace the 'stylographic calculator' (the computer) when it was first launched. Baudrillard noted, in the mid-1990s, that one has to be "inside" the screen, "on the other side of it" to be able to work on a text (Baudrillard, 1996). With the typewriter, there was still a degree of distance between the writer and text, but this seemed to vanish with the computer screen – this distance was eliminated by the effects of interaction as articulated by the device, meaning the observer-user is always part of the system itself.

The state of solitude, as alluded to above, and which, generally speaking, typifies the user in front of the screen, is another point of similarity with the 19th-century *flâneur*. The *flâneur*, according to Huart in 1841, "walks alone", because "it is impossible to *flâneur* in the company of others" (p. 115).

Meanwhile, the user's solitude within the vast, multitudinous space of the social networks, reminds us, again, of the many people who listen to the radio on their own, whom Benjamin described so subtly, as well as the old issue of the 'community of vision' that, almost paradoxically, would affect cinema. Although the cinema is a place for people to congregate, Derrida claimed that there was, even so, a fundamental disengagement: "in the movie theater, each viewer is alone" (2001/2015 p. 29).

We could, of course, draw certain parallels between the Internet user and the spectator in the cinema, for whom Derrida did not deem it convenient to use (due to their excessive solitude, perhaps) the word 'community', nor 'individuality', instead opting for 'singularity'. Only

this word seems to reflect the "extraordinary conjunction between the masses— [cinema is] an art of the masses, which addresses the collectivity and receives collective representations—and the singular. This mass is dissociated, disconnected, neutralized" (Derrida, 2001/2015, p. 29). As we see it, how to *operate*, in the new media, with anything that strays from this singularity/solitude still appears to be a key question today.

But let us establish here another reference point. While the cinema is a public place where we feel alone, the television offers a "depersonalising, solitary pleasure", a claim which Debray followed up with an enlightening metaphor, based on movement, to distinguish between cinema and television: "a TV addict is a controllable, sedentary person; a cinephile is an uncontrolled nomad. Good television reflects its audience, good cinema smashes the mirror" (Debray, 1991/1993, p. 262). Navigating the Internet surely offers us both possibilities, in the aforementioned duality between the digital *badaud* and the cyber-*flâneur*.

With regards to mobility and movement, we cannot deny, however, that the whole history of the technological image has also been, until relatively recently, a history of the motionlessness of seeing bodies. As an initial example we suggest the figurative imprisonment of the artist within the gridded, perspectival window, made for drawing,[20] or their confinement within the camera obscura (inseparable, as Crary put it, from "a certain metaphysic of interiority" (1992, p. 39), *cut off* from the outside world). This retention and lack of movement would continue into the early days of photography, when long exposure times required fixed, motionless poses. In fact, in the cinema, the spectator is subjected to a softer kind of 'confinement', or at the very least an immobilisation in the dark. Perhaps this is why it is so tricky to display works of moving images in galleries and museums, where it is hard, without 'confining' them to a specific room, to stop the spectators from moving around the space. This is because of the

[20] See Lev Manovich, 'An Archeology of a Computer Screen', *Kunstforum International*, 132, autumn 1995. 124-35.

usual, dynamic rhythm that is customary when contemplating static images in exhibition rooms. It is tremendously difficult to change spectators' habits of *walking*, in which they barely pause in front of images and objects.

The old aspiration to be wrapped up in the image would reach a milestone with the introduction of the panorama, explicitly realised as a virtual experience. This could only be achieved by surrounding the spectator, who was *enclosed* within the image itself. This restraint was pushed to the limit in the line of research initiated by Ivan Sutherland's Head Mounted Display, the dawns of a technology in which the screen would take on the condition of prosthesis, a helmet for enclosing the gaze, an encircling image.

It is no exaggeration to state, furthermore, that the technical image has almost always been linked to a certain motor 'disability' in the observer. The calmness of the cinemagoer, or the paralysis of the TV viewer holding the remote control, would lead to immobility being a prerequisite for the screens of the first portable laptop computers, which demanded an almost perfect positioning of the user in front of them, for if they moved, they would fall into a 'blind spot' or a 'negative' area of the image.

Up until the age of the mobile connected devices, we navigated on desktop computer screens without moving, enjoying ourselves as stationary travellers. Only the Internet user's hand would move, when clicking on the links that make up, among other elements, the Internet image. This invites us to talk about Novak's *pantopicon* (*pan* + *topos*), to describe the condition "of being in all places at one time, as opposed to seeing all places from one place" (Novak, 1996). According to Druckrey, in fact, being connected to the Internet was not so much a case of being 'immersed' in it, but rather 'being distributed'. This distribution of the individual around the framework of the web is a more precise definition of the Internet user, contradicting the old description of this situation in terms of 'immersion', just as it had appeared, for example, in Nicolas Schöffer's pioneering 1968 manifesto *The Future of Art*.

Nevertheless, our obsession with our connected devices' screens, the fact that we are almost constantly *chained* to them, should be understood, above all, in terms of addiction, of dependence on the intense pleasures that come from the Internet user's active 'surrender' – the screen takes on the role of the new, paralysing Medusa.

Observing the unmoving faces of the Internet users, captivated by the magical light from the screens of their computers and connected devices, by the light that comes from a luminous mirror, so radiant, invites us to rethink the idea of 'illumination' as addressed, for example, albeit too literally perhaps, in Evan Baden's photographic series *The Illuminati* (2006/07), but only to draw attention, critically, to its hypnotic power. It could even be said that the faces of the engrossed Internet users, subjected to constant *impressions*, are illuminated by the light that emanates from the compelling dynamism of the connected multitude itself. We are reminded of the exciting metaphors about the *energeia* of the multitude, which has long featured that individual who, as Benjamin put it, "plunges into the crowd as into a reservoir of electric energy" (1940/2007, p. 175).

Looking at the person who is looking at the screen is an attempt, within the field of artistic practices, to respond to the question about a figure who is hard to define and still largely unstudied: the computer user. Among the few thematisations of this figure, worthy of mention is, of course, the series *The Users*, by Kurt Caviezel, consisting of photographs of different Internet users captured via their own webcams. With a more ethnographic than artistic approach, there are other interesting projects based on documenting the reaction of the users of digital devices at certain moments, above all linked with the ever quickfire experience of videogames. *My Generation* (2010) by Eva and Franco Mattes, for example, showed intense moments of frustration and emotional outpouring by different gamers, revealing the powerfully addictive and uncontrolled nature of many digital devices. Also, Nia Burks, in pieces such as *Angry Gamers* (2010), carried out a visual exploration of the extreme emotional pressure felt by some young players of

online games such as World of Warcraft or Call of Duty, showing that what happens in the virtual, fictional space can have profound effects in the personal, real context. Similarly, the interviews with players of Grand Theft Auto regarding the situations experienced in the game, which were presented by Axel Stockburger in his work *Boys in the Hood* (2005), are good examples of addressing this phenomenology of videogaming, in which the borders between what happens in the digital space and what can happen, or seems to have happened, in *real* life, become greatly blurred.

Among works like this, it is also worth mentioning the series *Shooter* by Beate Geissler and Oliver Sann, which consists of images of gamers' faces whilst they are playing, showing the huge bodily tension generated by the game, and its expressive effect as body language (grimaces, head movements, etc.) in which the real body accompanies its avatar representation. This is a crossover of virtual experiences and *non-virtual* gestures, a creative exploration of the image of the body that exists *on the other side* of the screen. A look at the bodily effects of the virtual, in that barely-considered territory of the face of the computer user; the tension in the game causes expressions that are not a communication of feelings (the body, here, is not acting for anybody), but rather pure corporal dynamism, a strictly *organic* and *automatic* response to an intense regime of belief (one of absolute *engagement*, we could say) with regards to what is happening, what is being *lived* there on the screen.

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Image-World

Juan Martín Prada

1. On Display

Today, we strive to squeeze all information into a headline or a tweet, and our opinions are invariably condensed into 'likes'. Similarly, there is a generalised urge to make everything visual, so that it can all be seen at a glance. Putting everything *on display*, this constant showing, can but remind us that our world is "essentially advertising" (Baudrillard, 2005, p. 122). Exhibition value[1] takes precedence, so much so that things are only deemed valuable or interpretable when they are actually seen, when they are visually presented. Our society has rightly been dubbed the 'exhibition society', characterised by a striking overabundance of images[2] and the excessive inflation of the iconic.

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1 Walter Benjamin noted that "In photography, exhibition value begins to displace cult value all along the line." 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In W. Benjamin (1938/1968). *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World. p. 225.

2 We must not forget, as J. Winston indicated (referring to a text by J. Good) that "every two minutes today, we take as many photos as all of

The image has now diversified into an infinite number of different types. In this visual-digital world, the non-visible, that which cannot be formulated visually, now seems to be largely irrelevant and worthless. New links between the mundane and the ubiquitous have begun to arise. In these times, the issue is not that images play a key role in narrating events per se, but rather that they form an intrinsic part of what's going on.

Since the late 19th century, when photography let the world be seen *as an exhibition,*[3] we have sought to live, as Calvino (1953/1985) put it, "in the most photographable way possible" (p. 43). Today, given the extreme proliferation of devices for visual documentation and online applications for sharing images, our surroundings take on, more than ever, what Kracauer termed "a photographic face" (1927/1992, p. 433).

An endless stream of tools, apps and filters are designed to make it easier for our things and our faces to become merely *suitable* as images. These are two sides of the same coin: our image-making devices, our cameras, simultaneously verify and reject an experience (Sontag, 1973/2005), or they limit it, at least, to what is essentially a search for the photogenic.

To claim that we *see photographically*[4] is also to acknowledge cameras not so much as tools for remembering, but rather as devices for ensuring that pictures of things overshadow (without erasing) the things themselves, in an increasingly clear predominance of the technological record over our own gaze. This is part of a broad crisis in the relationship, always a bodily relationship, between our eyes and our surroundings, in search of an experience that is almost

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humanity did in the 1800s." In 'Photography in the Age of Facebook', *Intersect, 6(2),* 2013.

3 See the article by Timothy Mitchell (1989). 'The World as Exhibition'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History, 31*(2), 217-236.

4 I borrow this expression from Edward Weston, who uses it as the title for his text 'Seeing Photographically'. In A. Trachtenberg (ed.) (1980). *Classic Essays on Photography,* New Haven: Leete's Island Books.

constantly mediated by the screen. In these times, we have gone from seeing to viewing, from optics to visionics.

An infinite number of cameras continuously record everything, even if there are no human eyes watching the footage – their purpose, in most cases, is the mere storing of visual data, or the automated filtering out thereof. Such phenomena mark the arrival of an era of purely technical, automated vision, an act of seeing with no *human* gaze.

We desperately want to have images of everything, and we constantly try to give all of our experiences a visual form. These images, however, must always have a mirror-like quality if they are to capture our attention or move us, as demonstrated by the pictures of tragedies and humanitarian catastrophes - we only feel disturbed by them if we can see ourselves or our loved ones reflected in them.

There is perhaps an *excessive* presence of images today, which some associate with a primitivisation in thought patterns, i.e. the predominance of a "mosaic approach"[5] to thinking. This approach simultaneously flashes many disjointed elements in front of our eyes, almost always leaving out the more nuanced syntactic operators. Undoubtedly, nearly everything on social media shows parataxis: everything is presented on the same plane, stringed together, with no end in sight. All of these things claim to be equally valuable, wrapped up, as they are, in the bright and breezy novelty of this non-hierarchical ordering.

The direct link between the eye and the camera has now been applied to a wide range of wearable devices, such as the intimidating Google Glass or GoPro-style cameras, which record what we see from a subjective, first-person perspective, turning our experiences into something like a 3D videogame. These visual recording devices are hands-free: you no longer need to hold the camera, because it is attached to the body. In fact, the camera wants to be the body,

[5] The notion of the 'mosaic approach' is discussed in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 1962, p. 41-42 (and throughout).

it moves in sync with the body, and the body in turn becomes its 'tripod', its base.

Additionally, the merging of the camera and the communicational device, i.e. in mobile phones, led to the emergence of a new visual communication model, based on the combination of the image and textual language (Rubinstein, 2005). Even so, the image will always take precedence.

By treating the world like this, i.e. as an image, digital communication has become actively included within icon-based models. We chat with more and more visual elements, which are almost always pre-designed for us, and we frequently interact by using graphics selectable from a set, often articulating our conversations with visual alphabets.[6]

Certain applications have played a key role in the image's rise to dominance, as is typical of online communication. Sometimes no text is needed at all, mostly because these apps were actually conceived for smartphones and not the 'typewriters' with which we often associated the first computers.

"Say It with Stickers" was the slogan for a recent ad campaign by a telecoms company. The emoji syndrome, we might call it, is something we suffer from more and more intensely. Little wonder that the 'Face with Tears of Joy' emoji was the Oxford Dictionaries 'Word' of the Year for 2015.[7]

Debray (1992/1994) noted that "Kodak was to the image what Luther was to the letter" (p. 226) in order to make a thought-provoking comparison between the socialisation of the production of images, i.e. today's 'we are all photographers', in relation to the 'we are all priests' of Lutheranism (ibid.). And given the fact that photography is no longer solely for professionals, the flipside of this is that we are now all obliged to partake in it, we are 'enslaved' by it to a certain extent, as manifested in our desperate incessant snapping.

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6 See Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, 'The Summer of 'Pokemon GO'', *DiEM25*, 12th September 2016. [https://diem25.org/the-summer-of-pokemon-go/].

7 'The Oxford Word of the Year 2015 is . . .' [http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2015/11/word-of-the-year-2015-emoji/].

Even in the mid-1960s there were still those who resisted photography, as seen in this testimony noted by Bourdieu: "members of the upper class refuse to see it as an object worthy of enthusiasm or passion" (1965/1990, p. 67). This claim is of course unthinkable today, since we would never hear anybody stating, at least in high-consumption societies, that taking photos "isn't for the likes of us" (p. 16).

The slogan 'we are all photographers' entailed being a photographer *all* the time. It was the next step after the desktop phase, when we would connect to the Internet by using a computer in our office or home, followed thus by the phase of absolute portability via our tech devices. This portability means that the creation of images is also subjected to the condition of being 'always on', constantly connected, a continuous act of online sharing.

We are now in the era of personal live streaming, the day-to-day broadcasting on social media, in real time, of our lives, and we are beginning to envisage, furthermore, how live video content will become increasingly important in online social contexts.

The growing presence of videos in social media newsfeeds turns them into a multiple, simultaneous reality show. The Internet is gradually succumbing to the logics of television (Derakhshan, 2016), shifting its focus away from the written word, and instead giving precedence to a relentless flow of sequences of moving images.

This constant recording, or taking photographs of almost any given thing or moment, leads to the increased overlap between seeing images and producing them (in fact, today, the devices that take images are almost always the same ones that play them back). Thus, the oft-repeated logic of the world-as-image, the world as representation, happily assimilates into this new context.

Our desire to be permanently observed encourages us to come up with 'micro' forms of 'pseudo-events',[8] i.e. situations created with the express purpose of their being photographed and shared. These small, 'fake' formulations might provide the reason or opportunity

[8] For more on this term, see Daniel J. Boorstin (1962/1992), *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo Events in America*, New York: Vintage Books.

to create a visual record which can then be shared online, thus ensuring our continued presence *on stage*.

Traditionally, we have assumed that photography, rather than corresponding to one given vision of the world, in fact helps organise it in a particular way. This is based on the argument, which we would accept, that all photographs not only describe but also codify reality in some way, always encouraging the naturalisation of certain forms of seeing and looking. Of course, it cannot be denied that photography is a way to "achieve symbolic or imaginary possession over reality" (Robins, 1996, p. 157), as an instrument therefore of power and, ultimately, as a "defense against anxiety" (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 5). But when the act of taking pictures becomes constant, as is the case today, and almost like a reflex, this act might have more to do with the visual technology used than any intentional and subjective shaping of the field of perception. The technical aspect predominates, pushing aside the user's possible aims to shape the world, and so the intentions of the device itself come to the fore. The sniper-like photographer, taking calm and measured shots, has given way to the more trigger-happy machine-gunning photographer. We find it curious that, on smartphones, they still use an imitation of the old shutter sound to let us know, as Rubinstein (2005) has noted, that a device, which is now never just a camera, is taking a photograph.

These photographic 'machine guns', these quickfire devices that are our smartphones, give us the sensation that taking a photograph is, ultimately, an act of reiteration, that there will always be hundreds of other images of whatever it is that we are pointing our device's lens at. As such, perhaps we should accept that our picture will always be a *second*-hand vision, invariably a quotation, even if this quotation is not intentional or even aware of its source. Therefore, the fundamental issue is no longer acknowledging, or otherwise, that 'everything exists to be photographed', but rather to recognise the existence of a 'photographic world', a world-as-image, which comes before any impression that we might capture of it. This could explain the interest, for example, in certain post-photographic

practices, such as those creative, appropriationist acts that make use of online image banks or the all-encompassing systems of photographic documentation such as Google Earth.[9] Many of these proposals reside somewhere between acknowledging the all-embracing, comprehensive character of the worldwide photographic archive, and the continued prevalence, in the digital sphere, of new forms of *acheiropoieta*, those ancient representations made without any intervention by the human hand or eye. Today they have been replaced by the automatic gaze of the satellites and vehicles that provide the GPS services with their images, or by the CCTV and security systems that are *watching* all the time.

In the past, not everything was deemed worthy of being photographed. The act of taking a photograph used to indicate that whatever was happening, or what was in front of us, deserved to be documented, that it had a special worth. But with the proliferation of digital cameras, this maxim - i.e. that you should be a discerning photographer, that you should only photograph the exceptional (that which should be remembered for its particular solemnity, for its being an especially important or precious moment; in other words, something that does not come around every day) – no longer makes sense. In the digital age, the term 'photographable' is now somewhat redundant, given the radical shift towards the mundane that has meant that photography is now irreversibly dominated by the *ordinary*.

Photography is not necessarily associated anymore with special occasions, although, generally speaking, it is still a 'festive technique',[10] often deployed for documenting happy moments (above all when they are to be shared on social media, which only seems to be

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[9] I addressed the relationship between the image and GPS services in the section 'Fotografía y geonavegadores' in *Prácticas artísticas e Internet en la época de las redes sociales* (2015). Madrid: Akal, pp. 241-251.

[10] According to Bourdieu, photography is a practice "so strongly associated with extraordinary occasions that it could be seen as a festive technique". 'The Cult of Unity and Cultivated Differences' in P. Bourdieu, et al. (1990), *Photography: A Middle-Brow Art* [1965]. Cambridge: Polity Press. (English translation by Shaun Whiteside). p. 35.

for displays of joy and pleasure). There are still, of course, certain situations which have to be photographed, i.e. particular family milestones or events, as well as moments or places that we feel should be documented simply because that's what you do – for example, taking photographs is a must when visiting certain monuments or other tourist spaces, realised in the form of keepsake-photos, souvenir-photos or trophy-photos. We still succumb to the desire of obtaining our own versions of those images that have already been so widely reproduced, previously seen so many times, and which, finally, we can actually star in ourselves.

It has been said that Kodak was the first company to 'sell moments' – the expression 'a Kodak moment' became applicable to or even synonymous with any moment worthy of being remembered (Palmer, 2010, p. 160). And today, we can certainly say the same about the countless moments in our lives that we feel the need to photograph and share on social media: irrespective of their importance as unique events, we share them precisely because these are the kind of events that tend to be shared there. Whole lives are recorded snapshot-style, which shows how much we now imitate the representational behaviours that form the basis of the hugely powerful system of production within the prevailing 'social' or 'affects-based' capitalism.[11] Furthermore, given our willingness to follow its norms of articulation through images, this system is getting ever stronger.

2. Images of themselves

The claim that "a painting is a world; a photograph is *of* a world" (Cavell, 1979, p. 24) can no longer be true in all cases. With regards to digital photography, we cannot even make any assumptions about the observer's position in relation to the object represented. There

[11] For more on this term, see J. Martín Prada (2011). '¿Capitalismo afectivo?', *Exit Book: revista de libros de arte y cultura visual, 15,* 32-37.

are new technological tools that can work in ways very similar or identical to photography, but that produce completely synthetic images. Just because an image looks like a photograph, then, is no longer a guarantee that it has any true, direct relationship with a given element in the world of objects. Therefore, the claim that "the visual indicates, decorates, evaluates, illustrates, authenticates, distracts, but does not show" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 255), can surely be extended: the visual, above all, *shows itself*. Today, the image is increasingly an "image of itself" (ibid., p. 254), which can only be conceived as a fragment of the world, something both in the world and of it. The digital image is, above all, self-referential, and it always alludes, we could say, to the broad concept of *the visual* itself. Thus, we should move on from the question of what it means to *be a picture of*, unless this 'of' refers not to the object and subject represented, but rather to the issue of its provenance (who has sent it, why they shared it, etc.).

There is no filmed scene, according to Barthes (1961/1977), whose objectivity is not read as the very sign of objectivity. He was referring to the strong sense of denotation or "analogical plenitude" (p. 18) that, in his opinion, we get from a photograph. The analogue photograph was, essentially, proof that something was in front of the camera lens just when the shutter opened. Similarly, many years beforehand, Peirce (1894/1985) had noted that "photographs, especially instantaneous photographs, are very instructive, because we know that they are in certain respects exactly like the object they represent" (p. 11). This is the idea of photography as the witness to a presence, much like the inscription on the back wall in *The Arnolfini Wedding* (1423): 'Johannes de Eyck fuit hic' ('Jan van Eyck was here'). As such, this idea works on the assumption that the photograph is the closest possible image to a real object, because it is the imprint or inscription of the light that the object gives off, another key concept in the development of the photograph in its role as a fetish.

Nevertheless, we are all aware that analogue photography has an irrefutable ability to assert many different kinds of fiction, and this is rooted in, precisely, its supposed direct link with *reality* (which is understood as 'the truth'). Furthermore, we tend to forget that, despite the similarity, what we see in a photograph is not what we see with our eyes. Firstly, the camera's gaze is cycloptic, non-human, and secondly, as Benjamin (1935/1968) put it, "evidently a different nature opens itself to the camera than opens to the naked eye" (pp. 236-7).

In any case, the period that Barthes was referring to, above, is now over. In this age of the digital image, the observer must always bear in mind that digital technologies can entirely transform any image, or even create, out of thin air, something that looks exactly like a photo. Instead of taking for granted that there is a denotative link between a photograph and the world, we should cautiously assume that any given photograph is probably artificial, that it is unlikely to have a direct point of reference. We have to accept this 'unreality', which we could call the *disguise* of denotation, whose reference to or contrast with an external reality might well be inexistent. Ultimately, the computer screen is a seeing machine that is reluctant to attest to any kind of existence that resides outside of the same vision system that it belongs to.

Given that images have been freed from any necessary subjugation to a source, it is perhaps now more important than ever to look into how we believe in them. Derrida (2001/2015) stated that "it would be fascinating to analyze the system of *credit* in all the arts: how one believes a novel, certain moments of a theatrical representation, what is inscribed in painting and, of course, which is something else altogether, what film shows and tells us" (p. 27). It is worth emphasising here that the key question is no longer whether we believe, or not, in the image, but instead how it can (or rather how it seeks to) make us believe, its belief system, the ways in which this 'how' operates, as supported by representation. The issue of the supposed 'knowledge' that images can transmit has now been replaced by how 'credible' we find them to be, and this

is a necessary shift towards an analysis of the 'credit' with which we entrust them.

Whether in relation to these issues, or other ones, the fact of the matter is that we still talk about images, even if the term 'image' is perhaps no longer linked to the system of things that was typical of the *imago*. Nor has the term remained faithful, at all, to the idea that it must be a figure, a representation or something similar to something else. Quite the opposite: the best theses on the *death* of the image talk about the birth of "the visual" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 235), about a context in which the idea of the image would become diluted in a flowing, unstable environment, where nothing would appear to constitute an *imago*, but rather a purely visual *effect*. And the evolution from the video-based to the net-based culture served to intensify this situation, this immersion. We have gone, certainly, beyond the image, and we all now live incorporated into a system that is not so much of images but of image-discourses.

Despite this, we still use the term 'image' here, albeit in that sense, always *plural* (there needs to be an investigation into why there are only *images* whose multiplicity, as noted by Didi-Huberman (2016), "whether it be in conflict or connivance, resists any synthesis" (p. 65). As such, the *imago* is not necessarily a representation or an apparition (in line with the Romans' sense of *ghost*), and nor is it an echo (in the sense of the *resonance* of something real).

3. The New Forms of the Spectacular

Nietzsche asserted that the idea of decadence was connected to the loss of power to resist against the stimuli of the spectacle.[12] Following this critique, the link between society and the spectacle has been the object of constant attacks.

[12] Nietzsche describes what he refers to as among "the most general types of decadence" as follows: "One loses one's power of resistance against stimuli, and comes to be at the mercy of accidents: one coarsens and

The logics of the spectacle, the spectacular, were defined by Debord (1967/2014) as part of the process of the coagulation of everything in human activity that had previously existed in a fluid state. These logics have actively colluded with the world of the commodity in order to take over all living experience, since the commodity entirely colonises social life. Since we are reduced to being consumers of illusions, it is no wonder that Debord insisted, again and again, on the link between the spectacle, understood as a place of false consciousness, and the reconstruction of a *material* form of the religious illusion (p. 6).

The spectacle was thus established as the essence and the very basis of society. This created two-way alienation, in which reality was understood as a by-product of the spectacle, and the spectacle, in turn, was taken to be *real*. The result is none other than the *distancing* of things by way of their representation. The spectacle, therefore, is a mediating form that does not act before our eyes but rather as "the ruling order's nonstop discourse about itself, its never-ending monologue of self-praise" or, somewhat more graphically, the ruling order's "self-portrait" (ibid., p. 7).

However, if only out of caution, we should not forget our own *fatal* flaw: we often fall in love with these logics of spectacularisation, as noted, on so many occasions, by the theoreticians of the 'ecstatic' relations that are typical of the spectacular. These relations duly provide us with emotional, wondrous joy, caused by the dizzying rush of "stereotyped traits, unreal and recurrent" that so characterise them (Baudrillard, 1983/2001, p. 190). This spectacularisation was driven, above all, by the medium of television, which lives on, further intensified, in other forms and media. Yet spectacularisation was always spurred on by a somewhat ironic motivation, forced

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enlarges one's experiences tremendously". In *The Will to Power* (1967 translation): New York: Vintage Books (Random House). [Note: some English translations render "tremendously" here as "to a monstrous degree". See H. Siemens, 'Nietzsche on Productive Resistance' in H. Siemens, and J. Pearson, (2019). *Conflict and Contest in Nietzsche's Philosophy*, London/ New York: Bloomsbury. p. 39).]]

upon us by the heteropathological addiction that we cannot shake off: "the perversion of reality, the spectacular distortion of facts and representations, the triumph of simulation is as fascinating as catastrophe" (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 72).

But of most interest here, with regards to the concept of the spectacle, is its visual essence, as the impetus or inclination to put things *on display*. Debord (1967/2014) regarded the spectacle as the heir of all the *weakness* of the western philosophical project, which he claimed was an understanding of activity dominated by the categories of *vision*. He described the spectacle as the 'vision' of a world that had been objectified, and as the transformation of the real world into images. In turn, these images become "real beings - figments that provide the direct motivations for a hypnotic behavior" (p. 6). The spectacle, in short, turns capital into an image, the result of over-abundance – capital is accumulated to such an extent that it becomes an image. Elsewhere in Debord's *The Society of the Spectacle*, the spectacle is defined as "a social relation between people that is mediated by images" (p. 2).

A great deal has changed, though, since Debord's text was published in 1967. Firstly, his concept of the spectacle had a very restricted meaning, and was often applied to the 'mass media' and their usual forms of "news, propaganda, advertising, [and] entertainment" (1967/2014, p. 3). Today, however, spectacularisation clearly takes on a far wider range of forms, linked to an infinite number of new media that operate in vastly different ways to the traditional mass media. Similarly, the 'proletarianisation' of the world, in this age of information capitalism, can no longer be entirely attributed to the widespread separation between worker and product, or to the end of all direct personal communication between the producers, something which Debord considered in depth. In theory, this cannot really be regarded, anymore, as the main cause of the current processes that lead to increased precarity, since we now live in a world that is hyperconnected via personal devices for the accessing and broadcasting of information. Likewise, the idea of 'separation', so important in Debordian theory,

is not particularly useful when trying to understand today's new forms of spectacularisation, which are not quite so related with a fundamentally *unilateral* kind of communication (for Debord, we recall, the spectacle was "the opposite of dialogue" [p. 6], and he insisted on defining it as "a vast inaccessible reality that can never be questioned" [p. 4]). In contrast, the new forms of the spectacular tend to be participatory – today's increasingly common pseudo-events are actually carried out, experienced, by people who were previously just *informed* about them. This is an ongoing process that is steadily blurring the line between worker and consumer, as well as the old distinctions between production time and leisure time.

There has been another significant change in the new context of online participation, where everybody is a prolific producer and distributor of images: the world *displays itself*, it lets itself be seen. The world is not staged – instead, it would appear to stage itself, constantly. In other words, spectacularisation has been socialised, and expanded. Every moment of our lives, having been turned into images ready to be shared and circulated, aims for this widely-distributed condition, and so, every day, we all exert the alluring logics of the spectacular. Our life is no longer represented, but rather, we could say, *it represents itself*, crystallised in a multitude of sequences, of moments documented as an image. It's like when we talk about 'the world of the spectacle' when referring to producers, i.e. in the sense of a professional sector that is now, however, unspecified, since we all belong to it, to a greater or lesser extent.

In fact, many of the more critical stances in relation to the new forms of domination, among which we must mention some of the emerging artistic practices, are now attempting to present the Internet as a spectacle in itself (going against the idea of art just as an activity for producing works of art, i.e. for creating *other* spectacles). This distancing strategy (which perhaps turns the Internet and its processes into a kind of 'ready-made') has proven to be one of the best ways to reflect, in depth, upon the current conditions that are dictated by the state of hyperconnectivity in which we live.

Despite this, the *making-visible* concept, typical of the logics of the spectacular, cannot be considered as separate from the constant attempts at simplification, at boiling things down to their most appealing features. In this sense, things have barely changed since the late 1960s. The control over the forms of *displaying*, as exerted by the economic interests behind the new industries of subjectivity, can still be characterised as follows: images must be clear, bright, striking, easily recognisable and enjoyable, and they must adhere to certain templates that immediately spark attraction. The image should not only be that which society can be and do, but also *what it should want to be*, and this requires straightforward and immediate identification. This has led to a context geared towards speed and simplification, in which any act of interpretation is almost always discouraged (if and when we are drawn in, there is barely any room for interpretation, let alone critique). The spectacle continues to demand our obedience, so if the image were to require any degree of interpretation, this would of course be its worst enemy.

The network system still aspires to absolute legibility, an *aletheia* through the image, insomuch that it wants to make things appear in an act of dis-concealment that shows them off as desirable commodities. This world should really be called a world of *images without imagination*,[13] i.e. images which lack the power to say anything beyond that which is patently clear from their ever-'satisfactory' obviousness.

On the other hand, a rejection of the notion that an image's authenticity has anything to do with the legibility of what it represents, a rejection which is surely the basis of any critical practice of visual production (in the sense of the *anti-spectacular* image), can be found, in embryonic form, in Benjamin's writings. He

[13] I use the term here in a very different way to the one proposed by Claude Lanzmann, who stated that "I have always said that archival images are images without imagination. They petrify thought and kill any power of evocation." Cited in G. Didi-Huberman (2008), *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See section 'Archive-Image or Appearance-Image' (pp. 89 – 119).

denied that the photographic image necessarily conforms to visual clichés, those which, ultimately, "merely establish verbal associations in the viewer" (Benjamin, 1931/1999, p. 527).

Therefore, and bearing all of this in mind, when thinking about the possibility of a visual practice of *resistance*, what we should really crave is the generation of images that have certain potential for estrangement, at times even inducing a kind of "temporary dumbness" (Didi-Huberman, 2013, p. 189) which actively works against the enduring idea that making things *visible* is the same as making them *intelligible*. In other words, to challenge the logics of the spectacle there need to be images that require interpretation, as this is the only effective vaccine against the determinations of seduction and its *excesses* of meaning: such simplicity would only ever be swallowed up by the voids that all genuinely *critical* images (critical not because of what they say, but rather, precisely, because of the ambiguities they contain) need and seek.

4. Appearance as an on-screen *apparition*

Another particularly interesting aspect when revisiting Debord's concept of the spectacle today, in the age of the global networks, regards the term 'appearance'. The language of the spectacle is made up of the *signs* of the dominant system of production (Debord, 1967/2014, p. 3), and so, according to him, it all works via the manifest affirmation of the games of the apparent. This even extends to the spectacle's affirmation that life itself is a simple appearance, in its existential and social dimensions, or, to be more specific, the spectacle is a "visible *negation* of life" (p. 4). Therefore, and as the image of the prevailing economics, the spectacle is the main force behind capital's colonisation of all human social life. And it is important to remember that, before anything, this takeover is responsible for the demotion of *being* to *having*, followed by a second shift from *having* to *appearing* (p. 5), the latter of which entraps all forms of *having*.

Today, more than ever, is the age of appearances, insomuch that we increasingly tend to think that things are exactly as they outwardly appear to be. However, in this context, it would be helpful, and going against Debord's position, to make use of the term 'true appearance', bearing in mind that we cannot just understand the word 'appearance' as that which covers up the 'real' thing (as if the real thing were hidden by its own appearance), i.e. what it seems to be, and, yet, is not.

When all aspects of life are made visible, i.e. when they are forced, by their own protagonists, to appear as images, we cannot keep talking about a visible *negation* of life, no matter how much these patterns of visual production imitate the norms of the power structures, and regardless of how much they feed off their logics. It therefore makes no sense to keep talking about the conflict between being and appearing, nor to keep thinking about Debord's formulations of the spectacular like those of an inverted world, where truth is nothing but a *moment* of falsehood.

Of course, things exist in their matter, in their unmediated physicality, perhaps even in their Kantian noumenic unknowability. But they now also exist in the way that they appear on the screens within our informational ecosystem, since appearance today is, above all, on-screen *apparition*. Therefore, the apparent should no longer be linked with illusion, or with the false: there should be thus a rejection of the old Platonic notion of the image as a secondary copy of the real, and appearance and referent would instead be on the same plane, always co-existing as elements that complement each other.

There has also been widespread debate about how, in the world of digital simulations, it is but the appearance itself that disappears, appearance understood in the sense of the 'transcendental' dimension that might *appear* through the image. Žižek (2004) exemplified this by recalling those revolutionary events which, in his opinion, acted like a sign through which the transphenomenal dimension of freedom, of a free society, would appear. For the Slovenian philosopher, at the

moment when the simulation cannot be told apart from the real, everything is present, there is nothing transcendental which "'appears' in/through it" (p. 810) at all. Today, however, in the context of the overproduction of images in which we are living, it is somewhat debatable whether simulation still plays a key role, at least in the sense most commonly used since the early 1970s, when simulation was regarded as an imitating image, a forgery that would stand in for the *real*. We should not dismiss the idea that, in the millions of photos shared every minute on social media, there might well be a certain transcendental 'something' shining out, albeit fleetingly or dimly. This 'something', at times almost overshadowed by the clichéd forms adopted by the image, is but the intense desire to a live a life that is free, full and intense.

Furthermore, appearances do not go against the *truth* of things, for such things too exist in how they appear as an image. Appearance would be released, thus, from its subjugation to the *illusion*, which is understood as the false, what is not, and we agree with La Fontaine when he wrote about illusions that "never deceive by always lying to us" (as cited in Bachelard, 1932/2013, p. 27).

As well as our materiality or consciousness, we also exist in the way we display ourselves, how we appear before others, how we visually present ourselves in a certain way in the social sphere. This does not mean, however, and this must be emphasised, that a given thing's appearance subtracts any ontological 'beingness' from any of the other dimensions that make it up, yet it can no longer be denied that the social space is a visually-determined construct.

All of this, nevertheless, brings to mind distant times gone by. There are several clear similarities to be drawn between what we are living through now and certain norms of aestheticism from the late 19th century. Many of Wilde's writings (such as 'The Decay of Living', 'The Critic as Artist', etc.) seem to be replaying in our minds, those writings in which the possible was praised over the real, celebrating the liar, the pretender, those who prefer flights of fancy

over facts, denying thus the individual's supposed predisposition for transparency. Wilde's idea of realising one's own personality "on some imaginative plane out of reach of the trammelling accidents and limitations of real life" (Wilde, 1921, p. 2) is seemingly being evoked in the idealisation and aestheticism typical of the visual activity on social media. When we talk about avatars or profile pictures on social networks, perhaps we are talking about new games of masks, about how, echoing Rilke (1910/2011), there are people who "change faces incredibly fast" (p. 6). We are forced to acknowledge this multiplicity, so keenly practiced by many, in acts of displaying which either meet the prescribed expectations, or else are rebellious and resistant to them.

5. Images of a sea of data

The concept of 'cyberspace' has always had a strong visual connotation, as is clear in the definitions that associate the term with a spatialised visualisation of information (Novak, 1992), or a hallucinatory nocturnal landscape in the distance, which Gibson (1984/1995) described as "like city lights, receding" (p. 67). In fact, one of the most important facets in the evolution of digital design today is the visual and dynamic representation of this landscape, of the vast quantities of data and correlations that are in a state of constant transformation and flux. The aim is to turn immense volumes of informative material into something more visually comprehensible, presenting it, before our eyes, in a diverse range of interactive graphics. These visual configurations might bring to light hidden patterns within the abstract statistical data, or enormously complex correlations. Thus, they also have great potential for political elucidation, as shown in many initiatives, such as, for example, the visualisations by Josh On, Share Lab, Bureau d'études, Mark Lombardi, and the Public Accountability Initiative, among others.

There has been a huge evolution, in recent years, in the field of computational information design.[14] This has opened up many avenues so that we can handle, visually, huge quantities of constantly-changing data, and this data therefore becomes instantly intelligible. These practices show our need to turn information into an image, in order to *orient ourselves* in this new world.

By giving a visual shape to such huge quantities of data, the *absolutely large* takes on a tangible form. This action has quite rightly been termed 'anti-sublime', i.e. giving an image to that which, otherwise, bearing in mind its sheer magnitude, we would not be able to represent without the help of information technology. They are, therefore, forms of what is seemingly unfathomable, visual translations that simplify, by means of diagrams, those dizzying amounts of information which we think of as abstract and apparently infinite or incomprehensible when discussed in strictly numerical terms. Visualising data in this way turns it into something understandable, like an image: its correlations can be seen, and its scope is easier to comprehend. These visualisations usually allow us to navigate this sea of data on different scales: there is often a zoom function, so that we can choose between a macroscopic view (visually simplifying great volumes of information into diagrams) or a microscopic one (allowing us to delve into these digital visualisations until we see highly specific details).

Within these lines of investigation, into the visual design of dynamic data, there are also countless initiatives that can be linked to the idea of a 'kinetic information sculpture' (Fry, 2004, p. 165) These are visual practices based on graphs and diagrams, on drawing network systems, and on representing their tensions, densities and flows. Thus, the art of drawing goes back to its ancient meaning of *disegno*, linked with the connecting of points, a certain kind of cartography which retains, in any case, its underlying and now-transmuted notion of *vision* as *navigation*.

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[14] See Benjamin Jotham Fry, *Computational Information Design* [doctoral thesis], Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2004 [http://benfry.com/phd/dissertation-050312b-acrobat.pdf].

The interest in this kind of informational design practice is not only about, however, its ability to clarify or represent, synthetically or comparatively, the myriad of data that circulates on the Internet. Nor is it about revealing certain patterns of action or behaviour that are widespread or recurrent within this context. In fact, there are countless projects that almost parody such attempts at representing the innumerable, or that which is practically impossible to reduce into an image.[15] The paradigmatic example of this would be, of course, Borges's impossible map, drawn at a 1:1 scale, as described in his short story 'On Rigor in Science' (1946). As such, many initiatives in this emerging line of artistic creation do not actually seek to synthesise data, highlight correlations, reveal patterns or, ultimately, visually reduce the complexity of such data. Instead, some artists use these data visualisation techniques as a way of thematising our life experience, and how it is essentially conditioned by an immense and constant production of data and its non-stop circulation. These are, therefore, practices that talk about our life experience in a context defined by the infinite flow of information, opening up, for us, a poetic and critical space that is external to these same flows, even if this is always via, precisely, a *statistical* vision of things.

6. The Pulchritude of the Digital

Following the arrival of the TV monitor, the image was no longer just a substance that reflected some of the light that hit it (as happens with a drawing, a painting or a sculpture), and it became an image that actually emitted light. Many years beforehand, with the magic lantern, we had gone back to a certain *stained-glass window* kind of image, an *illuminating* image. Today, like a fireworks display, visual

[15] One of the first and best examples of these investigations into the 'anti-sublime' is the project by Lisa Jevbratt called *1:1* (1999-2002), which consisted of a visualisation of the whole Internet, via a navigable database that contained the URLs of all the websites that existed at that time.

events dart from screen to screen, bursting with their luminous, ever-changing qualities.

Some have gone so far as to claim that "the small colour screen more than satisfies the Neoplatonist desires of Plotinus [. . .] it gives us back the emotion of immediate presence" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 252). In all truth, it would seem that our fascination with the bright screens of television sets and tech devices can only be explained by thinking of these screens as some kind of substitute for what the Greeks called *to ekphanestaton* (that which "shines forth most purely").[16] However, reference should be made here, bearing in mind the radiance that these screens give off, to the recurring mythical-historical concurrence between sources of light and sources of authority.

"Thus again, the evening star is the most beautiful of the stars: not that the parts of which it is composed form a harmonious whole; but thanks to the unalloyed and beautiful brightness which meets our eyes."[17] This exquisite statement is by Basil of Caesarea, exemplifying the ancient emanationist tradition based on light, on *claritas*.[18] For Saint Isidore of Seville, as for many others, beautiful things were beautiful because of their light: "Marble pleases because of its whiteness, metals because of their sheen, and precious stones because of their glitter" (in Tatarkiewicz, 1970, p. 84). An historical interpretation of these views would take us beyond Greece, where beauty was fundamentally a question of form and proportion, towards the even more distant lands of the Middle East, where the

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[16] See Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press. 1993, p. 273.

[17] Basil of Caesarea, 'Hexaemeron', II, 7, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 8., Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (eds.). Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1895.

[18] As Tatarkiewicz notes, for Pseudo-Dionysius "beauty is defined as *consonantia et claritas* [. . .] that is, harmony and light, or proportion and brilliance". See *History of Aesthetics,* (1970) Vol.2. Mouton: The Hague and Paris, and Warsaw: PWN – Polish Scientific Publishers, p. 30.

idea of beauty was linked to the intensity of colours, aromas or sounds, to the *life-giving light* (Boman, 1954).

Today, it seems we are once again enchanted not so much by relations, but rather, as Plotino and Saint Basil said, by *simple* things, the kind of things that now shine on our screens. In fact, the dissociation between the form and the content of digital material, which circulates while adapting to countless templates in different apps and platforms, and to a huge variety of screens, situates us necessarily in an aesthetics not of formal relations but rather of *intensities*, perhaps closer to that of *radiance*. Ever since we moved into Web 2.0, information has no longer been linked with a predetermined visual design, embedded within a specific website. Instead, this information could now move around countless different interfaces, in thousands of ways, adapting to a wide range of possible setups.

Our gaze is trapped within the screen-walls, and so it might be pertinent to revisit the matter of *extromissionism*, the ancient theory that claimed our eyes emit beams of light (*per radios emissos ab oculis*). This idea now applies to the screen-eye, and we are instead the receivers of the light beams, as clinical as they are attractive, which shine out from the bright monitors of our computers and digital devices. On these screens each thing is impeccable, *beautiful*, above all due to the stark, immaterial neatness, which might be just as important as everything that appears on the devices' crystalline surfaces. Our *philokalia* is, undoubtedly, a love of the *pulcritudo*, of the extreme neatness of the *pulcherrime factum*, of all that is made with prodigious perfection, as is typical of the digital.

7. Immediacy and Obsolescence

We appear to have lost interest in all that we cannot take part in, i.e. anything which is not going on *right now*. It would seem that this development can largely be ascribed to the fact that freedom

today is understood, above all, as the possibility and fulfilment of spontaneity, ever further removed from freedom's ancient, precious sense that linked it to autonomy.

The need for immediacy is at the centre of everything. We are incapable of waiting; we want everything at a moment's notice, at the click of a button, available for download. This is the age of the new collectors and gatherers (rather than observers) of images, the age of avid downloaders.

In the past, the power of signs was a product of their depth, but now their power is defined by how prevalent they are in a given context. Things are now presented to us in their most obvious elements, so that they can be immediately understood. The time for reasoning has been cut – everything must convince us in an instant. Meaning is no longer the result of elaboration, since *it's already there*, crystal-clear, ready-translated into seductive visual configurations. This is precisely why images are now less likely to have any degree of mystery – today, at most, they might provoke a kind of nervous suspense or intriguing expectation. Thus, when we talk about the role of art in the production of 'counter-images', we should encourage, precisely, the kind of visual production that, above all, refuses to engage the spectator in an easy, immediate interaction. Instead, such counter-images should give off a *slower* and *denser* kind of light, one that requires a more prolonged visual *digestion*.

The history of the present is being written in messages of very few characters, in a revival of the aphorism, the fragmentary text. It is not so much a narration or a chronicle, but rather a proliferation of impressions. We are in the 'micro' phase of language, both in terms of length, as in posts and tweets, and in its scope of reference: it focuses on the personal, the individual. This is the social networks' intensive spectacle, characterised by the microscopic attention to the most banal and day-to-day goings-on, in the endless flowing of informative elements that flit tirelessly before our eyes. We are living in a spellbinding, almost hypnotic claudication, amid this multiplicity of shared details.

Interpretation, which is always a slow and forced exercise, tends to be reduced to simple, knee-jerk responses: 'like' or 'dislike'. *Hermeneutics* has to be instantaneous, just like the online messaging services. It seems we are being forced to accept an excessively obvious and literal reading of Roupnel's intuition, one which appealed to Bachelard (1932/2013) so much: "Time has but one reality, the reality of the instant" (p. 6).

Today there is barely any time, when trying to comprehend events, for going over them, or looking back. Our eyes are submerged in the flow of these media; everything seems to be situated in simultaneity. Chronological history gives way to an intense and frenzied affirmation of the present, with priority given to the event, to scoops, to breaking news, to the infinite potential of now. Aubert was right when he stressed that there was a cult of urgency in our "time-sick" society. The principle of the switching between broadcasting and receiving is what prevails now, and this switching is immediate. Its deceptive effect is crudely presented thus: "the less deeply we look into things, the more there is to see" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 285).

This present era is based on a logic of instantaneity. A context in which 'fluidity' or 'liquidity'[19] has been a successful metaphor for this sense of flowing and floating, useful for conceptualising the *flux-image* (Buci-Glucksmann, 2013) that is so typical of the virtual.

Just like waters rushing down a river, everything is constantly changing on our screens. The fact that it is now nigh-impossible to visit the same website twice (given there can be new adverts, new offers, based on the cookies of our own browsing history, or new comments that continually modify the content) is a good example of the constant variation in the online media landscape. If we used to speak of 'web pages', the permanent updating thereof now forces us to speak of flux-documents, of *shifting* images.

Perhaps the experience of surfing the Internet is so attractive and addictive because it is so intensely variable, even if it sticks to the

[19] See Zygmunt Bauman (2000). *Liquid Modernity*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

formula of always-the-same, but always-different. We are becoming accustomed to living in the age of a data-stream ecology. We cannot help but wonder about a new visual *kairology*, i.e. what to pause, where to focus our attention, in this deluge of a myriad of things that hurtle before our eyes.

It is unsettling to think that, in the network-culture, no real historical foundation is being laid: there is no substratum that might constitute the kind of landscape that can be revisited at a later date, as a fixed point of reference or contrast, to make it possible to look back at it all. But perhaps the problem is that we no longer know where to *look back* to. Instead of memories or interpretations, it appears that we are now just desperate for 'updates'.

Life, as articulated by communicative and affects-based flows on social networks, is characterised by momentaneous impulses, by short-terms actions, which some see as a somewhat *reckless* existence. And yet, there are still those who, for many reasons, refuse to play down the age-old associations between calmness and happiness.

Buci-Glucksmann (2003) made a distinction between two forms of the ephemeral: there is a 'melancholic' ephemeral which established, in her opinion, the historical baroque or modernity (Baudelaire, Benjamin, Pessoa, etc.) and another ephemeral that she called 'positive', which "pervaded the history of the gaze in 19th-century France (Monet)" (p. 27). But the effect of today's connected devices is so strong that the best way of characterising the current form of the ephemeral seems to be describing it as simply hypnotic – we cannot prise our eyes away from our screens, we always have to be bobbing along in the flow of informational waters that constantly rush past our ever-stimulated gaze. Our disquiet can only be relieved by plunging ourselves into the choppy waters of those vast digital outpourings.

The gap between space and time is widening - they are barely interlinked anymore, in a process that began a long time ago, around the dawns of industrial modernity, when both concepts came to be thought of as "mutually independent" categories of action (Bauman, 2000).

Information flows in front of our eyes, even if we do not ask for it or search it out. The captivating link with those huge waves of data turns the Internet into a space where we can lose ourselves, hypnotically, while observing an endless transit of information. Desire corresponds, above all, to the flow-form of things. Just like a river, we dive into, we *navigate*, the ever-flowing waters, and *here* is dissolved into a constant, immersive *now*.

Society's ultimate aspiration in terms of objects is no longer that they endure over time. This aspiration, which used to be the paradigmatic form of the principle of stability and permanence, so crucial to the ideology of ownership and property,[20] has slowly moved towards a more temporary and progressive updating of the objects at the subject's disposal. This looks beyond the economy of the obsolescence of products, which has now become, above all, an obsolescence in the mechanism of seeing and interpreting. Perceptual expiration, i.e. when vision itself goes out-of-date, is particularly prominent in the new digital society. This is clear, for example, with online browsers, those programs that turn lines of code into images, which become outmoded after a certain period of time and so have to be replaced by newer versions, along with regular downloads of updates and new plug-ins.

Although the devices might age, the image itself, as a file, will not. Nor will it yellow over time – this is unlike printed images, whose ink will eventually fade. But one day these image files might no longer be compatible with a given viewing application. In the digital sphere, the absence of physical ageing is replaced, instead, by the threat of inaccessibility.

We always have to bear in mind that what we see on the screen is being generated there all the time – it is a process of decoding,

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[20] We should remember that, for Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "bourgeois culture [. . .] aspires to possession, that is to extension in time". In 'Constituents of a Theory of the Media', *The New Media Reader* (eds. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort). Cambridge, Mass./London: The MIT Press. 2000, p. 265.

depending on the visualisation software used, as well as the settings determined by the user. Furthermore, the possibility of interacting with the digital image is but a form of synchronisation between image and observer. The moment these images appear before our eyes is the exact moment they are produced. The interactive digital image is reactive, in a sophisticated non-differentiation between our seeing the image and its *being ever-updated*.

We find ourselves placidly immersed within a continuous transit of many different kinds of information – news, messages, personal statuses. Our social media accounts are essentially real-time managers, always trying to satisfy (and intensify) our passion for what is happening. We lose interest in events when they're over; we are like those creatures that only pay attention to things that are *in motion*.

Yesterday's newspaper used to be the definition of 'old news', a term which can now apply to a tweet from just a few hours ago. This shows a devotion to the ephemeral, which today might echo Roupnel's only slightly exaggerated comparison between the instant that has just gone by and "the same vast death that holds dominion over abolished worlds and extinguished firmaments" (as cited in Bachelard, 1932/2013, p. 7).

It is still interesting to see how the most critical thinking has questioned, on infinite occasions, our tendency to regard real-time informative material, the kind broadcast by the media, as 'pure' acts of information, proponents of transparency, "unmarked by technical interpretation" (Derrida, 1994, p. 29). Page upon page has been written about this, essentially about how we are conditioned to connect the immediate with the non-mediated, to consider it as *the truth*. However, the key question today, as also raised in many of the more interesting artistic practices, seems to point towards how the 'real' appears to be conceived as 'real time', the *temps unique* that connective technologies give to us.[21]

[21] In the field of artistic practices, this thematisation has undergone, in the last decade, an interesting development. There have been Internet-

8. The Scattered Gaze

Max Nordau's premonition in *Entartung* (1892-1893/1898) was spot-on: he predicted that the end of the 20th century would be inhabited by a generation

> to whom it will not be injurious to read a dozen square yards of newspapers daily, to be constantly called to the telephone, to be thinking simultaneously of the five continents of the world, to live half their time in a railway carriage or in a flying machine, and to satisfy the demands of a circle of ten thousand acquaintances, associates, and friends. (Nordau, 1898, p. 541)

Certain texts by Simmel, Adorno, Benjamin and Kracauer played a fundamental role in diagnosing that distracted, unfocused perception was becoming a fundamental characteristic of modern subjectivity. The suspicions noted in some of these texts, regarding the link between distraction and regression (something which would probably be easy to link with the constituting of 'docile' bodies that Foucault spoke about) are still the object of constant controversy.

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connected installations, based on the real-time incorporation of data, as seen, for example, in works like *L'attente* (2007) by Gregory Chatonsky or *Murmur Study* (2009) by Christopher Baker. Another good example is *Moveable Type* (2007) by Mark Hansen and Ben Rubin, in which 560 monitors, situated in the lobby at the *New York Times*, show the daily copies of the newspaper (news, editorials, etc.) as well as searches, navigation and commentary data of their website's visitors. A dynamic 'portrait' of the 'life' of the newspaper, the flows of information that run through it, and the changing intensity throughout the day. This flow-automatism is also present in the installation *Decorative Newsfeeds* (2004) by Thomson & Craighead, based on the taking of continuous snapshots of Internet headlines so that they can be then reconfigured like animations or abstract drawings, thus turning informative content into lineal configurations that are constantly changing. These are all good examples of what we might call 'the real-time informational flow aesthetic'.

We live in an age in which our attention is scattered, divided, ever in *multi-tasking* mode. Our various different on-screen tasks (working, reading, communicating, etc.) are always interrupted by our checking something else. We can't do just one thing anymore. Constant cut-offs and the juxtaposition of different activities are typical of the lived experience in the means-of-access-to-information culture, and these interruptions are perhaps also the most palpable manifestations of the new forms of anxiety. We deal with different activities and different sources of information at the same time, and our attention thus floats around – we were warned, some time ago, that "it's hard to have a fixed point of view in a world where everything is happening simultaneously" (McLuhan, 1970, p. 7).

We used to become distracted when we lost interest in an object, but today we are almost always focused on several different objects at the same time: we shift our attention even if we are still interested in a given object, in a state of nervous hyperactivity. It feels like we don't actually have to move on from one thing to the next (perhaps endowed with that extraordinary 'divine' attention as described by Saint Augustine), as if everything is present (and conceivable) at the same time, before our eyes - we have the impression that it takes no time at all to hop, on our screen, between different elements.[22] We are getting used to the false sensation of being able to see things *all at once,* a gaze that takes in everything *at the same time*, which would only be possible with *distributed* eyes.

Our condition as permanently-connected beings means we are constantly exposed to the infinite number of attention-grabbing things that swarm around on the Internet. Many people, understandably,

[22] Saint Augustine, in *The City of God* (chapter XXI) described divine attention thus: "[God has] no variableness, neither shadow of turning. [. . .] Neither is there any growth from thought to thought in the conceptions of Him whose spiritual vision all things which He knows are at once embraced. For as without any movement that time can measure, He Himself moves all temporal things, so He knows all times with a knowledge that time cannot measure". *The Works of Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark. 1871, p. 460.

regard this as a serious problem, claiming that not being able to concentrate on anything prevents us from carrying out any in-depth analysis or interpretation, and we are limited thus to a merely superficial grasp of what's happening around us (if anything, we might add, 'attention' is the mind's focusing on the plane of meaning).[23]

It is often said that digital 'natives' are unable to pay attention to one single element for a sufficient period of time. This explains why, in the contemporary storytelling of our entertainment culture, there are continuous cuts, and each segment is loaded with action. This is to ensure that the average spectator does not get bored, since it might be gruelling for them to sit through a plot that doesn't have lots of twists and turns. It is hard to deny that, today, more and more has to be done to sustain the viewer's interest and attention. And, quite rightly, attention deficit disorders, which are so characteristic of our times, are frequently associated both with undue impulsiveness and an increasing intolerance of frustration.

More than ever before, we feel like we are living in a quasi-*schizophrenic* state (schizophrenia has of course been, for at least three decades now, the number one metaphor for describing the experience of living through capitalism). In this state, the ability for selective attention is reduced, and our perception is often scattered, projected upon multiple vanishing lines that hardly ever converge, and we are oversaturated while being unable to focus on anything at all. Entertainment culture plays around with this, skilfully merging strategies for attraction with distracting techniques. Stimulating, dynamogenic tactics are predominant, designed as they are to cause over-excitement in the perceiving subject.

It is well known that the technophilia of attraction played a key role in the emergence of mass visual culture. The problem is that, today, everything seems to be configured this way, i.e. in 'attraction'

[23] John Dewey noted: "In attention we focus the mind, as the lens takes all the light coming to it, and instead of allowing it to distribute itself evenly, concentrates it in a point of great light and heat". *Psychology*. New York: Harper & Brothers, 1887, p. 134.

mode. This mode aims for the oversaturation of content in this *infosphere*, the visually-appealing network that always aspires to be irresistible to us.

9. Giving Time to the Image

A process whereby vision became more accelerated was characteristic of the birth of modernity.[24] The touristic notion of seeing as rapid visual consumption gradually began to take form in the increased speed with which we relate to what is *on display*.

For the huge international exhibition in London, in 1871, a pamphlet was produced (as noted by Mallarmé) that advised how to see it all in just one visit. Seemingly, a great many images could be seen in very little time. This was the beginning of the ongoing disproportionate relationship between what is exhibited and the time available to contemplate it, which still applies to our exhibition practices today – we never have enough time to see it all.

Little by little, such speed was brought into the home, perhaps irreversibly, in the urban culture, and it would inevitably be reflected in the creative act itself. As Baudelaire suggested, there would have to be a corresponding adjustment in the correlation between the speed of the world and the artist's activity: "there is a rapidity of movement which calls for an equal speed of execution from the artist" (Baudelaire, 1863/1964, p. 4).

And, of course, perhaps the sharpest criticism of modernity's swift perceptual experience can be found in some of Nietzsche's work, and many find his negativity ideal for applying to the analysis of our perceptual experience today:

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[24] It is worth highlighting, for example, the illustration by Albert Robida, published in *Le Vingtième Siècle* in 1884, called *The Tramway in the Louvre, from The Twentieth Century*. In this drawing he depicted, with great irony, a group of visitors upon a tram, hurtling through one of the galleries inside the Louvre.

> the abundance of disparate impressions [is] greater than ever: cosmopolitanism in foods, literatures, newspapers, forms, tastes, even landscapes. The tempo of this influx *prestissimo*; the impressions erase each other; one instinctively resists taking in anything, taking anything deeply, to "digest" anything [. . .] (Nietzsche, 1888/1967, p. 246)

Towards the end of the 19th century, the requirements for slow and thorough contemplation were gradually left behind. Such rumination had been discussed at length in the previous century, above all with regards to empiricist-based aesthetics. In fact, many Enlightenment-era thinkers insisted, again and again, that in order to value the beauty of an object, we should carefully choose the appropriate time and place to do so, and bring, as Hume (1757) claimed, our imagination 'to a suitable situation and disposition" (p. 213). A perfect mental serenity, and the suitable degree of attention given to the object, would be essential conditions to ensure that the experience is not misleading. If, however, we do not find ourselves in this state of *tranquility*, and we are not paying enough attention to the object before us, then our aesthetic judgment, according to Hume, will be wrong. These are issues related to taste, and, as it happens, they were practically the same as those noted by Locke as being the cause of an incorrect differentiation of ideas:

> [I will not here examine] how much the imperfection of accurately discriminating ideas one from another lies, either in the dulness [*sic*] or faults of the organs of sense; or want of acuteness, exercise, or attention in the understanding; or hastiness and precipitancy, natural to some tempers. (Locke, 1690/1825, p. 105)

This well-concentrated, focused vision, deeply longed-for by Schiller, in which time would be *suppressed* in time (also akin to the medieval concept of the *beatific vision*) would however seem incompatible with the new perceptual habits of the 19th century, habits which would encourage the increasingly rapid reception of

images. This would all lead to the absence of any awareness of the passage of time, as is common in the spectacles and creations that would define the new entertainment culture.

Instead of being *absorbed* by the observed object, as usually happens in the act of contemplation (which for Schopenhauer, we must not forget, was essentially the route to the *idea*), objects and their images started to 'bowl over' the observer. A scopic regime which would get stronger and stronger, forced to keep accelerating, throughout the 20th century. The commercial gaze would end up annihilating, as indicated by Benjamin in 1928, any and all space reserved for free contemplation, since advertising works in a way, he claimed, that "hits us between the eyes with things as a car, growing in gigantic proportions, [which] careens at us out of a film screen" (Benjamin, 1928/1979, p. 88).

The history of the 20th century is, effectively, a history of spectators who are forced to acquire all the necessary skills so as not to be overwhelmed by the infinite abundance of visual elements that constantly bombard them. An age in which *contemplation* would be almost always reduced and broken down into mere *impressions*.

Nevertheless, today, subjected as we are to the frenzy of 'the visual', our gaze also seems to be *hungry* for time, which perhaps explains, for example, the relative success of TV experiments like Sakte-TV in Norway, i.e. 'slow TV' in which 'hardly anything' happens.[25]

Within the field of artistic practice, playing around with the timeframe of the gaze has been, for decades now, a core strategy, and approaches like this probably offer the most intelligent reflections on the time-based regimes of our perceptive habits. They are creative manifestations in which the visual is used to challenge mere instant relatability, going against any unthinking correlation

[25] Sakte-TV ('slow TV') is a television genre born in 2009 on NRK, the Norwegian public television and radio service. It refers to programmes which last for many hours, showing non-stop footage of events such as boat trips, salmon fishing or the winter migration of thousands of reindeer.

(complete, synchronic) that might be established with images from the commodified world. What many of the best artistic practices bring to the table is, precisely, a questioning of the time-based regimes imposed by the new media, based on the conviction that, ultimately, all art is, we should not forget, "a controlling of time" (Debray, 1992/1994, p. 267). They often seek, albeit momentarily or even symbolically, to challenge the thoughtlessness generated by the active, fast and constant assemblages produced by the generalised regime of aestheticism in which we live. They aim to interrupt this fake meaningfulness which tries to impose itself as the *inherent* logic of the world and which, precisely, operates at a speed that barely allows us to *situate* it critically. In fact, dealing with a time of the visual that is 'other' means that some of these artistic practices might well be regarded as the most sophisticated work that reflects on the experience of images and, above all, on the power they have. Such artworks seem to be imbued, due to their very nature, with the attempt to sustain the "critical moment of aesthetic experience" (Buck-Morss, 1996, p. 29).

Among all the time-based strategies that we have seen proposed in contemporary artistic practice, the slowing down of time, forcing the spectator to contemplate something over a prolonged period, is undoubtedly the most prevalent. These 'poetics of slowness' include interesting experiments based on times of observation/expectation, as seen in pieces by Bill Viola, David Claerbout, Sam Taylor-Johnson, Luca Pancrazzi, Douglas Gordon and John Gerrard, for example. The stretching, pausing and slowing down of time are methods that turn the very *presence* of the moment into the central protagonist, i.e. the way in which we experience events in time, rather than focusing on what the image is capable of showing in a given timeframe. This is a stopping of time, the effects of which could even be linked with certain aspects of psychoanalytic retroaction, insomuch that they might eventually help redefine past moments of reception, perhaps making it possible to restructure these moments in a different way. Interpreting these poetics might bring to mind certain ancient and

moving stories or moments about pausing and paralysis, such as the encounter between Onesicritus and the fifteen hermits who were "naked in different postures and motionless, coping with the suffocating heat of India" (Román, 2008, p. 55) or the thousands of tales about Medusa turning to stone whomever dared look her in the eye, or even how annoying it used to be at the cinema when the film roll would get jammed in the old projectors, freezing the image.

But *giving time* to the image can be achieved not only by playing around with pausing and slowing time down, but also, in an even more literal way, by doing so the other way round, i.e. *giving narrative time* to a static image. There are many noteworthy examples, but it would be remiss to overlook Sergei Eisenstein, who, as Deleuze recalled, would analyse paintings by Leonardo da Vinci and El Greco as if they were, in fact, cinematographic images. Similarly, Andrei Tarkovsky insisted on *giving time* to Brueghel's paintings, duly giving them 'the time'.

Creating a whole film from a single frame, i.e. creating a 'real-time' fiction based on the digitally modified stillness of a single image, was the proposal in the piece *Space Surrogate I (Dubai)* (2000) by Philipp Lachenmann, another good example of playing around with the nuances between 'occurring over time' and 'consisting of *duration*'. Exploring the Proustian incommensurability of the place we occupy in time, in relation to the place we occupy in space, is an ongoing poeticisation of a psychic, non-chronometric time.

Other artists, meanwhile, explored processes that went the opposite way, such as in the series *Theaters* (which began in 1978) by Hiroshi Sugimoto, or in *Illuminated Average #1 Hitchcock's Psycho* (2000) by Jim Campbell. But perhaps the prime example of these experiments into the *tempus* of reception is *Sleep* (1963) by Andy Warhol, six hours in length, with no soundtrack, projected slightly slower than usual (16 frames per second, as opposed to the normal 24), in which some of the footage was repeated in loops, thus stretching out the dream of the poet John Giorno, the passive protagonist of this film. Warhol thus created a false

effect of correspondence between the filmed time and the viewing time, bringing the cinematographic image and the photographic image closer together. As in another of his pieces, *Empire* (1964), we could say that the most significant aspect here was the brushing aside of the assumption that something has to happen before our eyes (the founding principle of art understood as a spectacle), a rebuttal which he achieved by shifting this assumption back onto the spectator (*something happens with me*).[26] It is a parody, in any case, of the media convention that presumes that something must *happen* in a given piece, that one shot must be followed by another, and that some kind of narrative action has to take place. It is an attempt to situate the reception of the image not in the sphere of entertainment, but rather in a certain form of inaction that radically questions the idea of art as a *pastime*. Gestures like this can be seen today in dozens of works that seek to present *duration* as a metaphor for a certain form of *resistance*.

But let us go back to our day-to-day experience as Internet users to point, albeit briefly, towards the time-based system that defines this experience. It seems fair to say that this system is almost always related to some kind of suspension, though sometimes minimally, of one's own will.

The fact that, today, we use the same machine, i.e. the computer, for both work and leisure, puts our power of self-control at risk, in terms of how we use it. Our own willpower has less and less control over of our actions in the digital sphere – our relationship with technological devices becomes progressively more akin to addiction. In other words, we begin to act in ways that *we do not want to*.

We are subjected to thousands of stimuli and attention-grabbing things, submerged in the media spectacle – we are barely aware of the passage of time, in a peculiar kind of pyknolepsy. The media-centred economy of time is based upon a well-studied continuum,

[26] See Rudolf Frieling, 'Reality / Mediality. Hybrid processes between art and life', in *Media Art Net: Survey of Media Art*, vol. 1. New York: Springer-Verlag, 2004.

made up of interruptions and discontinuities, that subjects us to the hypnotic passing of time. Its effects are hidden within a never-ending, hurried flow of information and images.

The current economies of the use of time, and of the consumer-spectator's exposure to media, always aim for time to pass by unnoticed, in line with a dynamic of stimulation that finds its ultimate form in the excitement produced by computer games or online pornography. The aim is to make the passage of time imperceptible, and this process lies at the heart of many lucrative economic strategies.

Unlike the progressive detemporalisation of audiovisual media, on the radio there is still a rigorous control over the measuring and signalling of time. Until recently, on some stations the time announcements still took precedence over the contents themselves, even interrupting them, abruptly. It has not been the same, of course, on television, which was always far less concerned with time, the experience of which was played down, the longer and more inconspicuous the better. This greater awareness of time, on the radio, can perhaps be ascribed to the fact that radio broadcasts are *blind*, showing a strange link between the absence of the image and the reliance on time to keep order. With no visual structure, the structure instead comes from the most objective of all measurements: time itself.

A critical approach to all of this would explain why many artists continue to play around with the practices of pausing time, just as they are produced and administered by the media and the entertainment industry in general. It is more necessary than ever to try to reveal, to make obvious, those elements that get in the way of any critical analysis of the new economy of time, in the uninterrupted flow of interruptions, and of effects that are always effective and biased.

10. The Snapshot

In the mid-19th century, the term 'snapshot' was coined to refer to a quick, sudden photo, taken without preparation, and with a very short exposure time. This soon becomes habitual, with the arrival of photographic plates made with a more sensitive gelatine, meaning that cameras could be held in the hand, with no need for a tripod – the photographer could thus work more spontaneously. The arrival of these handheld cameras led to the increased uptake of photography, a phenomenon accelerated by the launch, in 1888, of the original Kodak.

These new gadgets allowed photographs to be taken at any moment in any situation, breaking with the previous protocols of posing and careful preparation in a studio. From this point onwards, anything or anybody could be photographed anywhere, without the previous understanding of having to adopt a rigid pose. In fact, the term 'snapshot' would mainly be used, in many texts of the 1890s, to refer to those photographs taken without the express permission of the subject.

Although these new cameras meant that photography could now capture, immediately, any given moment, actually developing the photograph itself would still require, for many years to come, slow and delicate chemical processes to reveal the captured, latent image. It was only in the mid-20th century, when Polaroid cameras burst onto the scene, that the time between taking a photo and obtaining the positive image was drastically cut, reduced to just a few seconds.

The digital file, a distant descendant of what, in analogue photography, used to be the latent image, definitively eliminated the waiting time between taking the photo and viewing it. Today, the time between capturing an image and its appearance on the screen is negligible. The phase of the latent image (that magical, invisible impression, a purely *potential* image) is over, and it is now a matter of immediate appearance, an instant *revelation*.

The act of taking photographs would become, in many cases, taking a screengrab of the real-time video feed that appears on the screens or electronic viewfinders of cameras when setting up a photo, in the clear-cut precession of the moving image over the photographic image, which has now become the pausing of a flow of digital images. The importance of this might be as huge as it is fascinating, if we were to imagine that every old analogue photograph is simply a film still. Our understanding of the history of photography would change radically if, in an astonishing fiction, it were to be revealed that all photographs from the past are not instants isolated in time (with a past and future that are *lost*, i.e. not caught on film), but rather frames chosen from a recorded series (which would still be available to view, somewhere) of a string of lived moments frozen in pictures.

11. Images in the Key of the Present

According to Kundera (1988/1991), "Rubens discovered a peculiar thing: memory does not make films, it makes photographs" (p. 313). Under this logic, our memory would consist of thousands of fading mental *photographs*. Whether we accept this thought-provoking hypothesis or not, it is hard to deny that the history of photography has been, at least until the arrival of digital technology, that of a profound desire to generate memory or, at least, to facilitate this by means of technology. When life's enjoyable experiences are few and far between, photography can multiply them in the memory, with the possibility of using technology to relive that which we cannot experience again *existentially*. However, the relationship between photography and the past has not always been regarded in a positive light. As Sontag reminds us:

> Whenever Proust mentions photographs, he does so disparagingly: as a synonym for a shallow, too exclusively visual, merely voluntary

> relation to the past, whose yield is insignificant compared with the deep discoveries to be made by responding to cues given by all the senses—the technique he called "involuntary memory." (Sontag, 1973/2005, p. 128)

The widespread use of analogue photography turned it into a language of *disappearance*, condemned to document the fleetingness of time, capturing unrepeatable moments, freezing as an image that which will never again be before our eyes, at least in that *exact* way. Castel was right when he said that photography is "the representation of an absent object, *as something absent*" (2003, p. 334). Essentially, that has been the most accurate definition of photography: "presence in an image, that is to say, the presentation of an absence" (ibid.). The image is, therefore, analogous to the present, to the lived moment, bringing back that experience by means of synecdoche, where a part, an instant, represents the whole.

However, this is not the predominant meaning within photography today, in most cases. The use of photography in advertising shows how current strategies for encouraging consumption are focused on describing the contexts and settings where these products can be used, seeking their total incorporation into the present moment. It is about presenting images that have to be perceived in the opposite way to how, traditionally, we would relate to the photographic image. The idea is not to see the documenting of a *past* state of an object or situation, the freezing and witnessing of a moment, but rather, to be exact, it is about seeing a present that the spectator-consumer has to want to appropriate for themselves. Advertising photography therefore seeks to prevent any time-based requirement of the object, aiming to situate it in a total and permanent present of which the advert is proof.

Similarly, the photos we share on social media must also comply, to a large extent, with an advertising-style function (that of our own self-promotion), and they are situated in the key of the present – their temporality marks not so much 'this is what happened', but rather

'this is happening', or perhaps 'this has just happened'. Although they are events in the past, they are always in the key of the present; by sharing photographs on social media there is a tacit engagement with right now, with our present situation.

Furthermore, the outsourcing of memory as offered to us by digital media, which can bring back at any time the exact same visual experience, turns the act of remembering into something increasingly like clicking the 'play' button. To remember is no longer to evoke; seeing is reduced to *seeing again*, to a reencounter with certain images. And this is perhaps one of the most typical features of this 'informational chrono-politics' that comes from our living *with* time and not so much *in* it.

Although photography quashes any presumption of objectivity in representation, given the huge scope for images to be manipulated, there is still a presumption of *authenticity*, not in the photograph itself, which is almost always edited, touched up or enhanced in a thousand possible ways, but rather an authenticity in the atmosphere of the event it describes. Ultimately, the desired notion of *truth* in photography is about leading a life *of one's own* and it being seen as true, that the time captured in those images was free, and that the enjoyment was authentic, even if the images themselves are an array of tweaks and filters. This notion of authenticity is very different to the old idea of objectivity. Therefore, on social media, the exhibition value of photography is what rules, a value that Benjamin compared to cult value, which now, of course, is barely existent. The one exception of this value, where cult value does not back down "without resistance", that "ultimate retrenchment", was, for Benjamin (1935/1996) the "human face" (p. 258). But even this exception appears to be going extinct today, somewhat paradoxically, given that we live in the time of the *Face*-book, where the millions of people there do not invite us, of course, into any cult-style relationship with the past, but rather they always demand, of the onlooking visitor, a *radical* form of the present.

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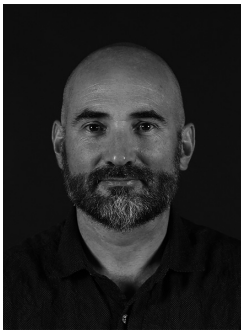

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Art, Images and Network Culture

Art, Images and Network Culture addresses the impact of the Internet and new connective technologies on contemporary art, over the last two decades. These essays deal with a wide range of themes, including the emergence and key aspects of 'social media art', the central issue of online identity within artistic practice, the links between digital connectivity and the physical space (telepresence/teleproxemics, augmented reality, geolocation, etc.), types of property and the digital commons, the forms of critique proposed by cyberfeminist creativity, the transformations in the gaze, and the new ways in which images are generated, circulated and propagated in a digital context articulated by social media.

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